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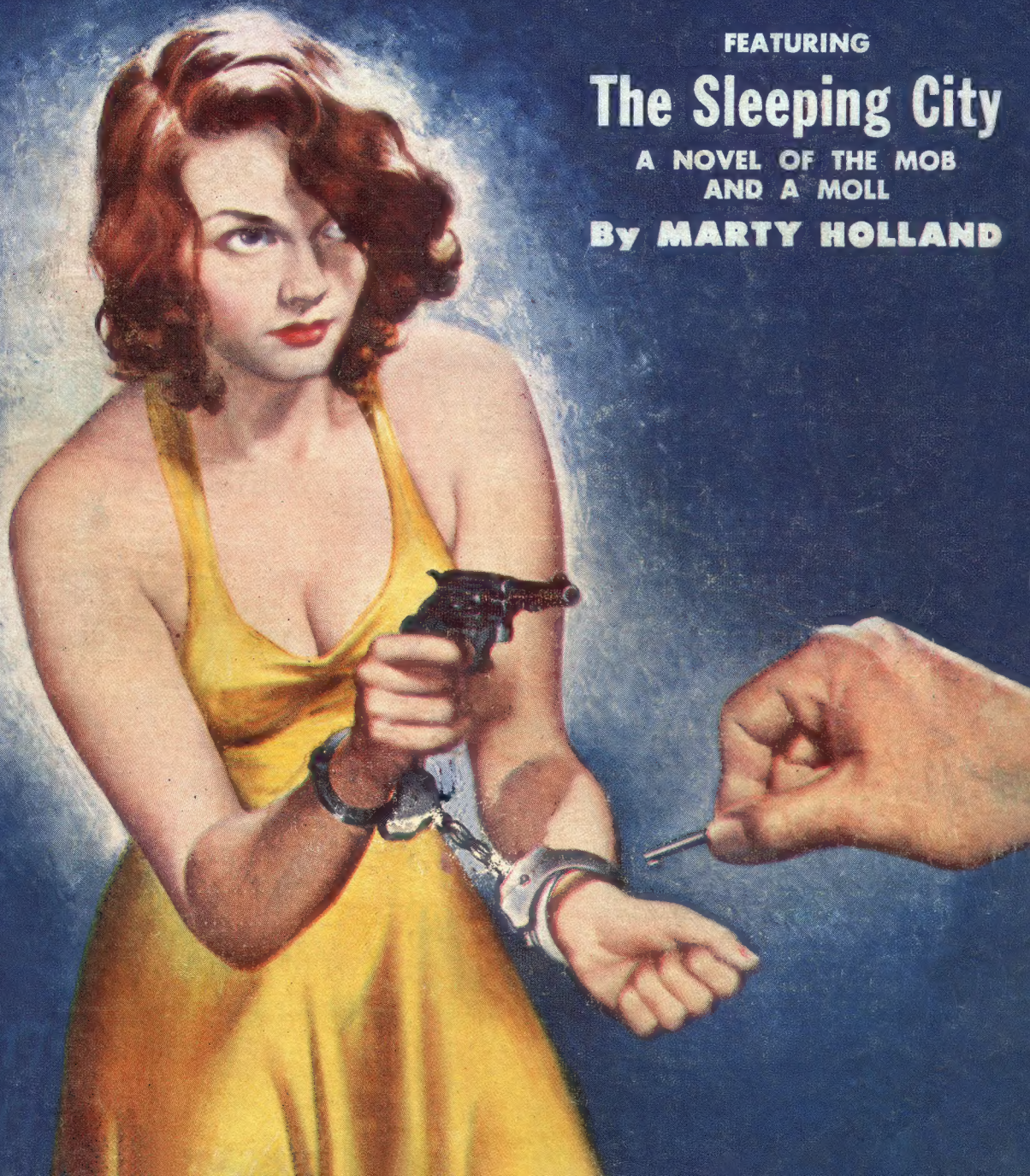
DETECTIVE

FEATURING

The Sleeping City

A NOVEL OF THE MOB
AND A MOLL

By **MARTY HOLLAND**



Reducing Specialist Says:
LOSE WEIGHT

Where
It
Shows
Most

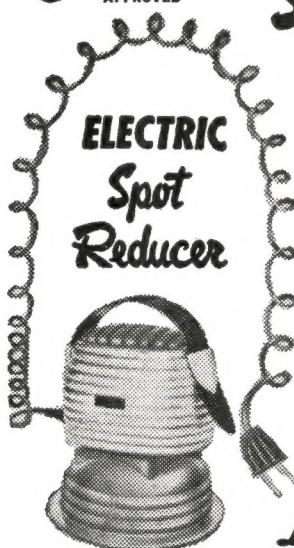
REDUCE

MOST ANY
PART OF
THE
BODY WITH

UNDERWRITERS
LABORATORY
APPROVED

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing
Penetrating Massage



**ELECTRIC
Spot
Reducer**

**PLUG IN—
GRASP
HANDLE
AND
APPLY**

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—**MASSAGE!**

LIKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.



FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use Spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

**Don't Stay FAT—You Can Lose
POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY**

Without Risking
HEALTH

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of **RELAXING, SOOTHING** massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down **FATTY TISSUES**, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more **GRACEFUL FIGURE!**

Your Own Private Masseur at Home

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters laboratory approved.

TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only \$1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman \$8.95 plus delivery—or send \$9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of **FAT**. **MAIL COUPON now!**

ALSO USE IT FOR ACES AND PAINS



CAN'T SLEEP

Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.



MUSCULAR ACES:

A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

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OR NO CHARGE**

USED BY EXPERTS

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

ORDER IT TODAY

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SPOT REDUCER CO., Dept. B-128

1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose \$1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only \$8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose \$12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

Name

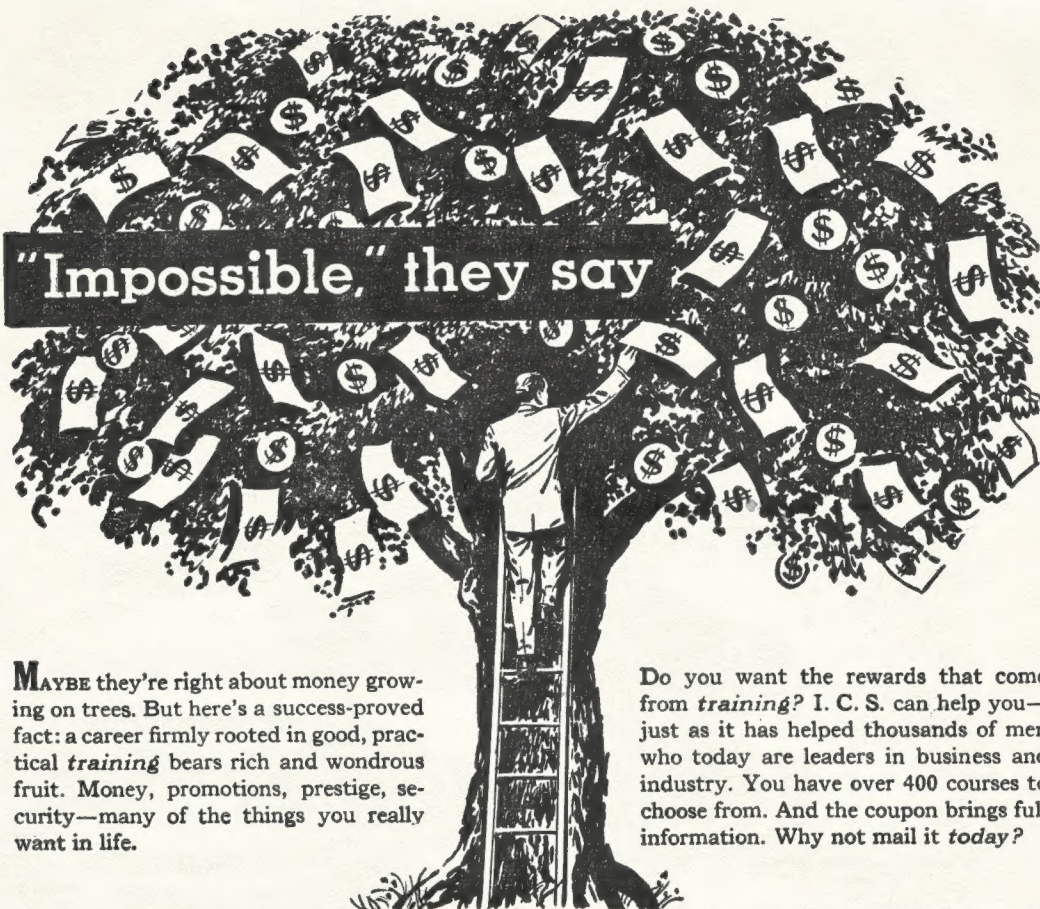
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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

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Do you want the rewards that come from **training**? I. C. S. can help you—just as it has helped thousands of men who today are leaders in business and industry. You have over 400 courses to choose from. And the coupon brings full information. Why not mail it **today**?

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5,918,692
men and women**

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Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

THRILLING

DETECTIVE

Vol. LXX, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Fall, 1952

Featured Novel

THE SLEEPING CITY.....Marty Holland 10

Night had dropped her curtain on the city . . . but behind the scenes a mob, a moll and an undercover dick played for keeps. . . .

A Full-Length Novelet

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Alexander Samalman, Editor

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Build a Fine Business...Full or Spare Time!

I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

SHOE BUSINESS



**You Don't Invest a Cent!
I Furnish Everything FREE!**

Want to have lots of money in your pocket — always? Then rush the coupon below and start toward your own business. In many ways it's better than a retail store of your own! I plan to give it to you absolutely FREE. You don't invest a penny now or ever! Be in this highly profitable business QUICK.

HERE'S WHY IT'S BETTER!

As the direct factory man handling the quick-selling line of this 47-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

It's easy to fit folks in the exact style they want—no need to substitute—you draw on our huge factory stock of over 175,000 pairs plus huge daily factory production.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from \$5 to \$10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.



Velvet-Eez
THE SHOE THAT FITS YOU

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-964, Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

BIG, STEADY PROFITS FOR YOU — NO OVERHEAD!

That's right! You have all the advantages of a profitable shoe store business without the expenses of rent, light, heat, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! No wonder Mason men are making more money than ever before. Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

No Experience Needed... Make Money First Hour!

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 121 styles of smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, barbers, waitresses, nurses, housewives — everybody! Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes easy to sell.

SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit! I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!



SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co., Dept. M-964
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE and postpaid your Powerful Selling Outfit — so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

Name

Age

Address

Town State



Ears to Hear With

A True Story of Crime

By JACK DEALY

SHERIFF FLEMING strode up to the concession stand in the Columbia, Tennessee, court house, and tapped lightly on the counter. "Bob, give me a coke, please," he said.

The operator, Bob Wilkes, turned his head. "Just a second, sheriff." He dried the bottle as he drew it from crushed ice and then set the drink before the officer. "Anything going on?" he asked.

Fleming handed Bob a dollar bill. "Yes," he replied, "I have a case involving you this time, Bob."

The husky operator stopped short of his money box. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded, puzzled.

"Someone passed two fake dollar bills on you last week, Bob. Know who it might have been?"

Wilkes thought a moment and shook his head.

"Here they are," Fleming said as he handed the imitation money to Bob. "Inspect them and if you run across anything suspicious later, let me know. I'll come for the bills in a few days."

The sheriff finished his drink and picked up his change. He left while Bob ran the two fake bills through his fingers, feeling the texture. Bob drew two real bills from his money box and compared them with the bogus ones. There was no noticeable difference.

Bob snapped one of the bad bills between his hands. It ripped apart from the pull. The sound gave Bob a start and suddenly he exclaimed aloud, "That's it!" To prove his point he took one of the good dollar bills and gave it an even harder snap. It remained intact. "This means that a bogus bill will tear apart and good ones won't," he thought to himself.

With this in mind, Bob began his own detective work. Each time he was handed a bill, he would casually give the money a snap. For several days this continued, but it seemed the person who had duped him was not going to

return. Then one afternoon a young boy asked for a package of cigarettes.

"What kind?" Bob asked.

The youth answered and Bob queried him about the weather and a few other points for the purpose of conversation. As he turned to make change for a bill the boy gave him, Bob snapped the paper. It ripped apart with ease and the sound felt like a shot to the suspicious concessionaire. Whirling around, Bob immediately found that the boy had recognized the discovery. He had fled through the court house corridor and into the street.

Within a matter of seconds, Bob summoned Deputy Sheriff Malcolm Gray and pointed in the direction the boy had run. Not having been given a description of the boy, Gray halted a boy who seemed to be in a great hurry about two blocks away.

"Hey! What's the idea?" the youth demanded.

"You'll see," Gray replied.

Returning to the court house with his suspect, Gray confronted Bob with the boy.

"Now, what's your name?" Gray asked.

"James Grant."

"Where were you going in such a hurry?"

"I was going home."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

Gray shot several other questions at the youth and he replied to each.

Then the deputy turned to Bob Wilkes. "Is this your man?"

"That's the one," Bob said.

Under further questioning, Grant confessed to passing counterfeit money. The operator of the court house stand could not identify him by his appearance. However, it was easy for Bob to recognize the youth by his voice. You see, Bob Wilkes is blind!



**KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS**

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

This Sealed Book—FREE

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you *A Sealed Book* of explanation without obligation. This *Sealed Book* tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.



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The ROSICRUCIANS

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CALIFORNIA

DOUG CAME TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...



HE'LL NEED HELP
IN THOSE TREES! I'D
BETTER GET OVER
THERE!

BOUND FOR NEW YORK CITY AFTER A WEEK'S
FISHING TRIP, DOUG DAVIS WATCHES THE
PILOT OF A CRASHING PLANE DRIFT INTO
HEAVY TIMBER...



ARE YOU
ALL RIGHT?

YES... BUT
AM I GLAD TO
SEE YOU!

A
GIRL

HE FINDS GAIL WILSON, CO-OWNER
OF A NEW YORK AIR TAXI SERVICE
IN A BAD SPOT.



PIKESVILLE
HOSPITAL NEEDS
THIS SERUM
DESPERATELY

I KNOW THE
ROAD LIKE A
BOOK. LET'S
GO



I MUST PHONE ABOUT
THE PLANE, TOO, SO I'LL
BE ABOUT HALF
AN HOUR

I'LL WANDER
ABOUT TOWN

SHE'S A PIP!
WISH I'D SHAVED
TODAY



HELLO. WHERE'S
THE BARBER? I
WANT A QUICK
SHAVE

HE'S OUT TO LUNCH.
BUT, THERE'S A
GILLETTE RAZOR
YOU CAN USE



HERE'S
A THIN
GILLETTE
BLADE FOR
YOU

THANKS



I GO FOR
THIS BLADE
OF YOURS.
SKIMMED 'EM
OFF SLICK AS
A WHISTLE!

WHISKERS DON'T
COME TOO TOUGH
FOR THIN
GILLETES.
THEY'RE REALLY
KEEN!



SO YOU LIVE IN
BRONXVILLE!
I'VE JUST JOINED
THE OAK HILLS
GOLF CLUB OUT
THERE

DAD IS A
MEMBER, TOO.
YOU MUST
MEET HIM

YOU'RE
HANDSOME!

ON THE LONG DRIVE BACK, GAIL AND
DOUG FIND PLENTY TO TALK ABOUT.



YOU GET FAST, EASY SHAVES AT A SAVING
WITH **THIN GILLETES**, AMERICA'S
FAVORITE LOW-PRICED BLADES.
THEY OUTLAST ORDINARY BLADES 2 TO 1
AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY.
SO FOR SHAVING COMFORT AT MINIMUM
COST, ASK FOR THIN GILLETES



10-25¢
4-10¢



TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

CRIME CAPERS

THE CRIMINAL MIND is capable of many vagaries, some of which provide a chuckle for the busy sleuth. Here we've rounded up a few of the more colorful items that have spiced the current crime news.

WHEN THEY FAILED to find any money, burglars who broke into a home in Elburn, Ill., apparently thought their efforts should be compensated somehow. They cooked themselves a meal of bacon and eggs.

RETURNING TO JAIL after hunting all over for a man wanted on a bad-check charge, a North Carolina constable could hardly believe his eyes. There was the man he wanted. He had been hired as jail janitor and was cleaning out a cell. The constable just closed and locked the door!

BECAUSE POLICE RAIDED his favorite bookmaker, an unknown Philadelphia horse fancier is \$400 to the good. A telephone rang during the raid. A detective took the call, listened to the man on the other end of the line place a \$400 bet. "Save your money," the detective said, and hung up. The horse named, finished out of the money a few minutes later.

A MILWAUKEE CITIZEN, recovering his stolen car, saw that the engine had been damaged. He went to get a mechanic. When he returned, the car was stolen again.

SIX PRISONERS in the Atlanta jail got tipsy just by inhaling the fumes of the 430 gallons of confiscated bootleg liquor they were detailed to pour out.

A NEW CALL BOX put up by a Massachusetts police department was promptly stolen.

IN CHICAGO, a low-lifer pulled the trolley off a street car, then proceeded to rob the motorman of 60 bucks when he came to investigate the trouble.



IT IS AGAINST THE LAW in Erie, Pa., to doze off in a barber chair while getting a shave.

WHEN FIGHTING BROKE OUT in a Cape Town, South Africa, bus, the driver drove the entire load to the police station.

A SAN ANTONIO CITIZEN complained that a former girl friend was standing outside his house throwing bricks through his bedroom window. When police asked if he wished to bring charges, he replied, "No—she must still be in love with me."

SECRET SERVICE AGENTS revealed that a group of counterfeiters dunked \$5000 in bogus bills in coffee to give the currency a properly aged appearance.

BAD NEWS FOR MURDERERS who go in for the arsenic motif comes from London, where it's discovered the Geiger counter can disclose how much arsenic a victim has had, also when it was consumed.

IN CORPUS CHRISTI, a gunman fired wildly into scores of shoppers in a crowded grocery store, wounding two persons, then walked across the street and ordered a slice of watermelon, which he calmly ate while awaiting the arrival of police.

THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL still seems to be going against the British. Some crook walked off the other day with an 800-pound cannon captured by the Redcoats, and which had been kept in Quebec.

"A GIRL CAN'T HANG her panties out to dry any more without having them stolen," Virginia women have been complaining. For the past year a mysterious thief has been swiping panties from the lines left and right.

AFTER SLUGGING the caretaker in an Indiana clubhouse and before departing with \$1,850 from the safe, a burglar considerably placed a pillow under the man's head and gave him a double shot of whisky.

—Harold Helfer

The SLEEPING



CITY

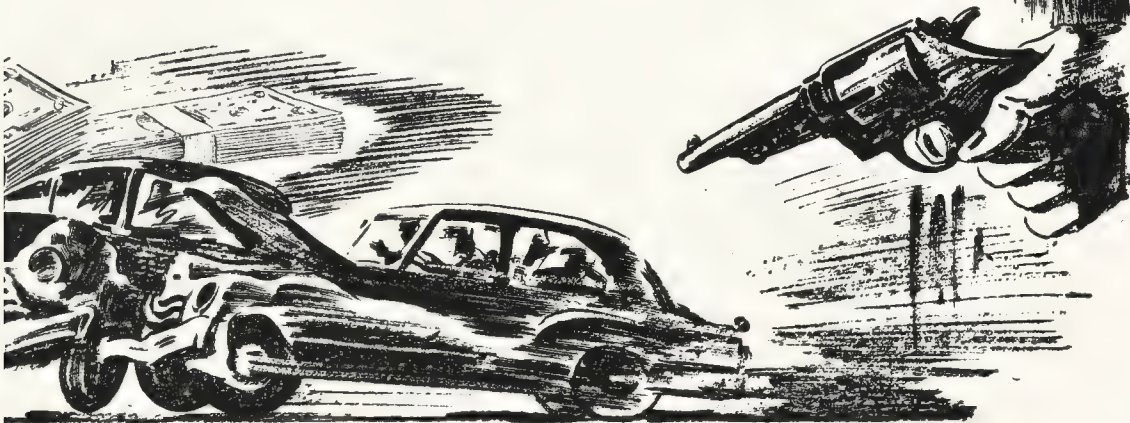
A Novel by MARTY HOLLAND

*Night had dropped her curtain on the city
... but behind the scenes a mob, a moll
and an undercover dick played for keeps. ...*

I

IT STARTED with rain in the city, with Officer Harris and myself in the plainclothes car. By now it was daily routine. The radio was giving out with a few drunks, a fag molesting somebody, a hit-and-run at Center and Third. There were no earthquakes, no murders, no tidal waves, no invasion from Mars, and no premonition to warn me that on this January night was to start a chain of events that led to love and death and the corrosion of a guy's soul—the kind that could eat your life away.

There was just the same pattern of pedestrians' faces, with their umbrellas and raincoats, scurrying through the downpour.



Wade Reed Didn't Mind Coping with the Hoods

Worrying wives, gumming up downtown traffic, picking up their guys from the office buildings, the same lonesome kids on the corners, hustling to sell their sheets.

I wheeled the squad car on up Tower, fighting through early evening traffic, the windshield wiper working overtime, rain splashing around us, sounding like gentle hail on the steel roof. Harris and I had been working partners for about a month. The guy could talk to horses, but they couldn't talk back. The local race track had opened only a week ago. "Laddie Boy" was all I'd heard all day.

The radio began blasting from the various controls. I listened with half an ear.

"Nineteen-T, Columbus and Whitsett, ambulance traffic. Fourteen-L, call your station. One-four-L, call your station. All units in the vicinity Spruce and Eighth, at the liquor store. Two-eleven there now. Sixteen take the call, Code Three. Eighteen-W, call your station. One-eight-W, call your station."

18-W was our car. I reached over and pulled up the mike, pressed the button, heard the transmitter whir and rogered in. Harris was still on "Laddie Boy." I don't think he even heard the call. I pulled over to the curb at the first drug store. I ran out through the rain and inside to a phone booth. I dialed the City Hall and asked for our extension. The phone buzzed, then a voice boomed on the other end of the wire:

"Sergeant Jackson—Gangster Squad."

"This is Wade," I said. "What's up?"

It took him a minute to answer. I heard him lay the phone down, heard a rustle of papers, then

"Yeah, Wade. The old man wants to see you." He paused. "How far out are you?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Okay. Come on in."

THE phone clicked in my ear. I hung up and went back to the car. Harris was sitting there with water spots on his gray hat and coat, and a new *Racing Form*

—the first time he'd moved his fanny all day.

Twenty minutes later, Harris and I had checked the hack in, and I was ambling up to the third floor. The robbery office was humming with change of shift and guys shooting the breeze. I checked the keys in, signed Harris and myself off the log book and made our daily report—all the time wondering what the captain had on his mind.

I went into his office.

Captain John Roberts—the old man. He was only six foot three, with Joe Louis shoulders, gray-black hair, a chubby red face. I'd met him first five years ago at briefing for the first Berlin raid. An iron-ass colonel, just in from another group. I'd looked at him and thought, "A retread from the last war! What the hell does he know?"

I flew left seat for him, co-pilot. Everything had gone fine until we turned I. P. on the bomb run. Kraut pilots that day must have been the original Abbeyville kids—the top boys that Goering had once owned. They even had their trainers up, with the engineers and ground crews throwing monkey wrenches!

Roberts had the ship, and the bombardier was flying it with the bomb-sight, going in on the target. I'd been calling fighters to the gunnery crews when I felt the ship lurch, and smelled smoke drifting in from the radio room! A 109 had sewn a nice long ripple in the top of our Fort.

When the nose of the ship dropped I looked over at Roberts. The flak helmet he was wearing hadn't done him too much good. He'd been clipped across the top of the head with a cannon shell. Blood was seeping down the side of his face, onto the beaver collar of his flying jacket. I knew then that he might be a colonel, but he could die just as quick as a lieutenant.

When the fighters stopped coming in, I got hold of the engineer on inter-com and had him come up and take care of the colonel.

I started the turn to the rally point, leading the group, with flak laying before us like

but the Dame Proved a Bit Too Hot to Handle

a black cloud. Our ships were strung out beside me and in the rear, with several spots—ships that had gone down.

We hit home base with only two wounded aboard, and plenty of holes in the skin that covered the plane. Roberts wasn't in too bad shape. Two weeks in the hospital fixed him up. He'd lost a lot of blood and a lot of hair in the flak helmet.

Two weeks later I received notification from General Farmer that I had myself a

the Gangster Squad, to work under Captain Roberts. Nobody had to tell me who was responsible for my promotion.

Now he was seated at the old mahogany City Hall desk that looked too small for him. It was cluttered with debris, a model of a B-17 holding down a stack of papers. Roberts sat with his glasses pulled down on the end of his nose, reading a report.

"Hello, Wade." His voice was deep and resilient. His eyes hadn't moved from the report. "I'll be a minute. Sit down."



THE MOLL

DFC for leading the group home. It was one medal that I didn't deserve.

It wasn't until after I'd joined the cops, and had worked six months doing foot traffic duty, that I learned that Captain Roberts of the Gangster Squad was the old Colonel Roberts that I'd known in the Eighth Air Force. I went in to see him, introduced myself, and met him all over again.

I had him out to dinner. He met Betty, my future wife. We talked old times and lived them again.

Three days later I was transferred to

I GOT the uncomfortable feeling then that I always got with Roberts. He hadn't looked up when I came in. I might have been the janitor or the chief. The guy always did have eyes in the top of his head.

I sat facing his desk and looked out the window. Night had dropped her curtain on the city. There was the steady downfall of rain, and through it the faint echo of traffic from below, the distant whir of wet automobile tires, and the huge neon sign from across the street flashing on and off, casting its purple shadow in the room.

It was then that I noticed the suitcase on the floor by the desk. Draped over it was a two-hundred-buck hounds-tooth topcoat and a nice brown felt. I looked back to Roberts.

"How's Betty?" he asked, his eyes still on the report.

"Fine. Fine."

"Tell her hello."

"Sure will. She'll be pleased."

There was a silence, then:

"Harris okay?" He was still reading.

"Horsey," I said, "but okay."

"I'm pulling you off," he said brusquely. Then his voice softened somewhat. "That is, if you'd like working alone."

"Suits me," I said.

Roberts stopped reading. He leaned back in his chair, scratched his head, regarded me, then offered me a cigarette. I took it and lighted up and waited for what was coming.

He lighted his cigarette. "I've grown

weary of Eastern hoods coming in here for no good. Jim Cox flew in from Chicago this morning." He reached across his desk and picked up a report. "Here's the dope on Cox, and a mug."

He threw the police photo down on the desk before me. He adjusted his glasses, keeping glancing at the paper in his hand.

"Theft from person in the State of New Jersey," he went on. "Also a record of having stolen property. Record of being an enemy of state, and embezzlement of state funds. In Cleveland he was picked up for murder, and released. Known as a jewelry fence in Detroit. Picked up for murder in Miami for the killing of Willie LeMont, and released because of insufficient evidence." His eyes snapped up.

"Never heard of the guy," I said.

"Neither did I"—he smiled grimly—"until I got word from an informer that Cox was coming in and that he was recently a member of the Les Ties gang." He took a breath. "Last week Les Ties was found in the Loop with a lot of holes punched through him." He glanced at the floor. "Somebody worked him over with an ice pick."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. What the hell is Cox doing out here?"

Roberts shrugged. "I planned a little reception for him this morning at the airport. Cox wasn't too talkative at first. It took persuasion. Finally admitted that Ties had arranged for his contact here before he was killed. Cox came on out to take advantage of the deal."

"What sort of deal?"

Roberts sat back, rubbing his five o'clock shadow. "Cox says he doesn't know details. His only instruction from Ties was to see a bartender at the White Lion Club." He paused. "That place ring a bell with you?"

"Louie Thompson's new joint," I said. "On Sixth Street."

He smiled. "And you know who Louie is?"

"Yeah. Got his start back in the Twenties—during prohibition. He took a fall for the Wright Act. After he got out of the joint he moved to Miami. Came here last

September. Been running bookmaking and narcotics."

ROBERTS nodded. "What we want is to see that he hits the bucket again—but good. Thompson doesn't know we're wired. Thinks as far as our Department goes he's an honest citizen, running a legitimate café. And to all that meets the eye, he is. A smooth baby." His voice lowered. "Maybe this is my chance to dump him."

I studied Roberts. "What's the pitch on it?"

"Jim Cox is buried. No counsel. No writs. Nothing. Incommunicado. He's never been in contact with Thompson or any of his men." He smiled again, humorlessly. "So what keeps me from sending in a substitute?"

I nodded. "What charge did you hang on Cox?"

"Suspicion of murder." His eyes flickered. "Somebody killed Les Ties. Why not suspect his trigger man? The idea didn't set too well with Jim. He knows I can bury him forever on that charge, and I'll get plenty of help. That's why at four this afternoon he was ready to talk. The beautiful part is, since Les Ties is dead, Thompson won't be able to check on him with Jim Cox. Jim swears everything he's given me is straight. If it isn't you'll find out soon enough."

"I'm beginning to see how I fit in," I said.

He nodded. "Don't worry about Cox. I can hold him as long as it takes to set up our deal."

He leaned forward and gave out with the old spiel about my clean record on the force, said I'd been chosen for this assignment because of my integrity, because I'd kept up to date on the pulse beat of hoodlums, because I had been born and raised in Chicago, and also because I bore somewhat of a resemblance to Cox.

"Get to the White Lion around ten tonight," he continued, and glanced at my brown gabardine. "Cox was wearing a dark business suit, white shirt, red tie. Pack up the clothes you feel will be suitable. This is a job that'll take time. See Al, that bartender. You're to tell him to fix you a Haig

and Haig, Silver label. Al will take it from there. Cox swears that's his only instructions."

I took a deep breath. Roberts went on:

"Okay, Jim Cox—" He reached for something in his desk, handed me a ring, a gun and a wallet. "Jim's property. We're borrowing them." He nodded toward the suitcase on the floor. "There's his luggage, his topcoat and his hat."

Jim's gun was a .38 two-inch with a ramp sight—a belly gun. His ring was set with a round green stone with a little snake eye in the center. I jabbed it on my finger. It was tight but not too uncomfortable. I opened the wallet. It obtained the usual cards of identification.

Roberts rose and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"You flew in on American Airlines, arrived at six-fifteen this evening, Flight Four-two-eight." His eyes narrowed. "If it's a bum beef give me a call at the Roxy dining room tonight." He flushed a trifle. "Little birthday party for my mother." His voice shot up. "If there's trouble you can handle it." He looked at me and smiled. "I found that out a long time ago. If Cox has given me the straight goods, sit tight and play. It'll take time to discover what Thompson is up to."

He handed me the report on Cox. "Memorize the record and put it back in top desk drawer." He went to the closet, pulled out his tan slicker and jabbed his arms into it. "Report to me any way you can. Don't come near the office." He gestured to an envelope on the desk. "There's your expense money. If you need more, yell. Count it. There's three hundred bucks. Sign the receipt. I'll take your gun, your badge, and your I.D. card."

I got up and handed them to him. He put them on a shelf in the closet, then locked up. I signed the receipt for the dough.

"Oh, yes," his voice ground on, "there's been a dame seen regularly with Thompson. See if you can find out who she is." He paused in thought. "She might prove valuable for information."

He started to the door.

"Play it close to your belly, Wade. Keep everything cozy and we'll be all right. Good luck, kid, and don't get hurt!"

II



ROBERTS left. I shoved the three hundred bucks into Jim's wallet. I sat back down, stuck my feet up on the desk and lighted another cigarette. Slowly and carefully I began to memorize the report, while rain beat its steady tattoo on the windows, and the neon sign flashed on and off, casting its purple shadow.

Suddenly there was the fury of a moth beating its torn wings against the desk light. My eyes stayed on it. Impulsively I reached out and snapped off the lamp. The moth dropped to the desk. It was snow-white, and as beautiful as a butterfly. It lay fluttering, exhausted.

I wondered what screwy quirk of nature attracted them to light—to the point that it killed them.

A half-hour later I was headed for Spruce Street—and Betty—with rain trickling through the cheesecloth roof of my Ford convertible. For eighteen months I'd planned a new top. But with room rent, car payments, and saving up to be married, I'd never got around to it.

I slid into the driveway, pulled up to the double garage, and parked in back of Betty's Chevy coupé. Looking at it I remembered that I was supposed to put in a set of new plugs. She was going to have to wait for them now.

I hurried up the drive and saw her through the kitchen window, wearing a red-checked apron, looking like a Norwegian doll, her blonde hair upswept, brown eyes softly luminous. It was the reason I'd first dated Betty—a blonde with brown eyes. My special weakness.

I kept looking at her, feeling my heart take on an extra beat, thinking of the time when I wouldn't be just the guy who had a room in the house next door to her any

more. But, hell, I wasn't complaining. If it hadn't been for that room I'd probably never have met her.

I set Jim Cox's suitcase, topcoat and hat down on the back porch. I went inside and found her putting a roast back into the oven.

"I'm warming things over for the *fifth* time." Her voice was on edge. "You could have telephoned."

I closed the oven door for her and took her arms and put them up tight around my neck. I said something about how terrible it was what future wives were getting by with these days. Not even one kiss for a beef-weary groom-to-be.

Then all of a sudden she smiled and was warm and wonderful until she remembered the biscuits. Then she was opening a can and pulling out dough.

I said, "Just like Mother used to bake."

I peeked into the living room at Betty's sister, Doris, and her husband, Clyde, with his big fanny sprawled all over the piano bench, his right fist diving in to the chocolate dish, his left hand strumming. "Don't Cry, Joe."

Why that guy had always irked me, I'll never know! I've tried to get along with him, because Betty lived with them, but I ached for a day—soon—when I could eat dinner with Betty, and visit her, without that guy prying into our affairs.

Doris was seated on the sofa, by the tired Christmas tree, reading a magazine. I did a double-take, seeing my mother seated beside her. Across the room from them sat a forlorn blond boy of ten or eleven years.

"Forgot to tell you," Betty's voice came over my shoulder, "your mother's here. With another potential little Dillinger."

I groaned. And then my mother, having heard my car pull in, was hurrying toward the kitchen. She swung the door open in my face, then hurriedly closed it.

"Wade," she said a little breathlessly, "I've brought Bobbie."

"What's the charge this time?" I asked drily.

"Well," she said, "his mother permitted little Bobbie to run some errands for me this morning. My diamond ring was lying on the sink and—" She took a breath. "His

mother returned it, of course, but—"

"Burglary, eh? Send the suspect in."

A MINUTE LATER, Bobbie, pale and trembling, came into the kitchen. He stood biting his lip, his eyes on Betty as she moved back and forth from sink to stove.

I gave the kid the old pitch on crime not paying, told him the pride I felt in being on the right side, that I saw all the follies of humanity and profited by them. I got a fervent promise that he'd pass up the stealing urge.

Then my mother had the floor. "My son is becoming quite a missionary," she announced to Doris and Clyde. "This is the *seventh* boy he's saved."

"If I saved him," I said.

"Of course you did." She beamed at me. "One look at that police badge, does the trick." She looked down at Doris. "Did you know Wade was a gangster himself once? Oh, yes. At the age of fifteen he—"

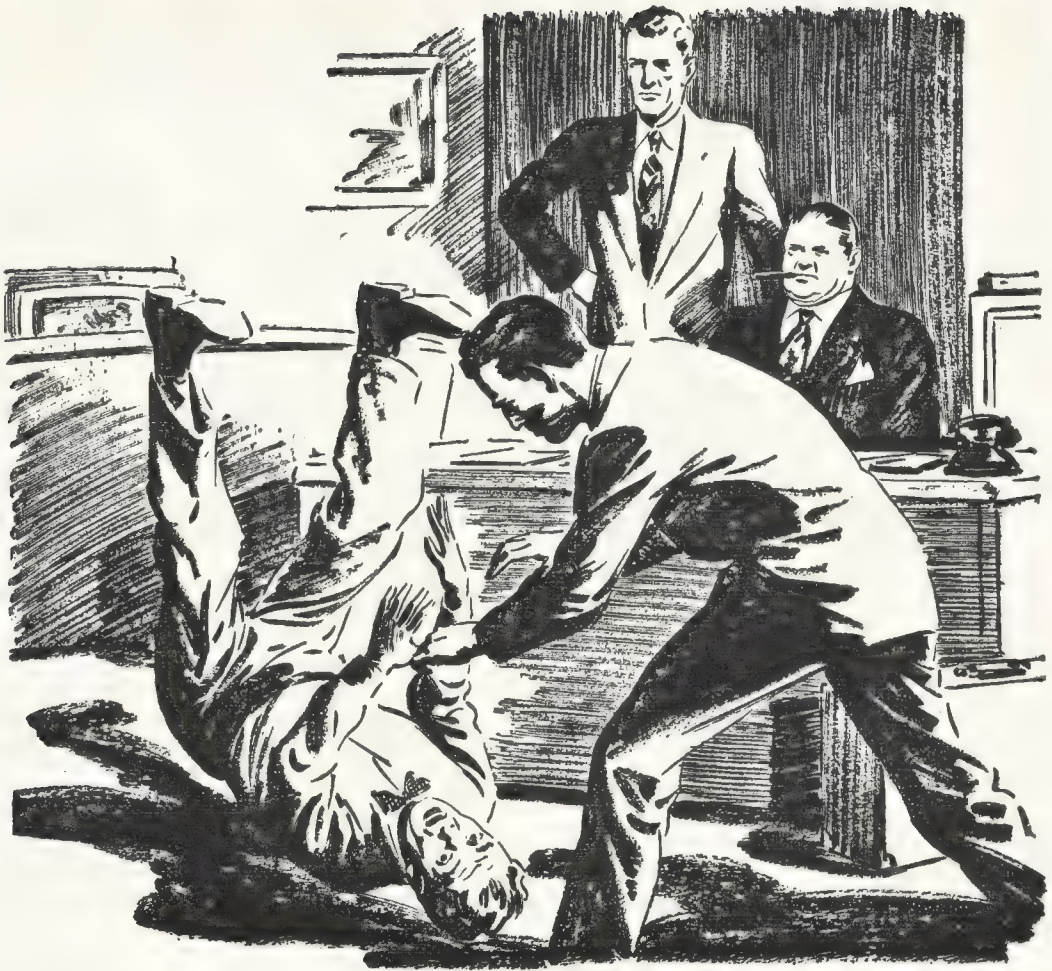
She went on, reiterating how, as a kid in Chicago, I'd joined a gang and started out my career by swiping fifty crates of lettuce from an old freight car, then peddled the lettuce from door to door, three heads for a penny.

She was still going strong when I left to go over next door to my room to shave.

Crazy, dumb kids! It was the successful lettuce haul that had lit the fuse. The next job was bananas. After that the local soda fountain. The proprietor was near-sighted, senile, had gout in one foot. Between customers he'd limp behind the back partition and rest on his day cot. Even though the register made a loud clanging noise, by the time the old man could hobble in, our gang member could be out of the store.

Since about a hundred kids bought malts and candy in the place, we felt sure that the old man wouldn't possibly be able to identify the thief.

I'd drawn the short straw. Even now as I thought about it I could taste the brassy fear in my mouth that I'd felt as I'd crept along the counter to the register. And then I was grabbing up greenbacks. Hearing the cash register bell, the proprietor let out a bloodcurdling scream. Before I made it



I pulled him over my back and flopped him on the floor

out the door I heard an avalanche of falling debris, and the old man's groans.

Next morning's paper told the story. Several five-pound cans of malted milk had fallen from the shelf, pelting the poor old guy on the head. From a hospital bed he'd told how he'd been robbed by a youth of fifteen or sixteen.

The police visited all the punks in the neighborhood. I denied everything and the cops believed me. But I still remembered my mother's eyes, how she cried all night. She knew how I'd suddenly got the brand new bike and the twenty-five-dollar bank account.

I became an ex-hood—but fast!

Now I could laugh about it, and my mother could tell about it whenever she had somebody to listen.

"Dinner's ready."

Betty had come in while I was shaving, was beside me. I pulled her over and rubbed lather on her face and kissed her warm, full lips.

"Hurry," she said, and left.

I hoped that the house would cave in, or Clyde would break his leg, or I'd slit my throat shaving, so that after dinner I could be with Betty, instead of starting a long assignment on a night like this!

When I got back over, my mother and

Bobbie were gone. Then I was seated, facing Clyde, at the dinner table.

"Darling," Betty said, "as soon as we're married I hope we can afford an automatic washer. Doris says they're marvelous."

I yawned. "If I can rake up fifty grand, we'll even have television."

CLYDE pointed his fork at me, a potato dangling. "By the way, Wade, I always wanted to ask—" He went on chewing the mouthful of food he was talking through. "What's your average take in a month—side dough, I mean—on a job like you've got?"

I held back an urge to spring at him. He was like some other people I knew, rating a cop in the hood racket. Sure, a dick thinks in the same pattern as a hood, only he has to think faster, and he sure as hell doesn't make the hood's dough!

Betty reached over and patted my hand. "Wade has never taken any juice," she defended. "Why, I remember one time a grocery clerk gave him a dollar too much change. Wade drove five miles, all the way back, to return it."

"Yeah," I said, "be sure my epitaph reads: 'Here Lies A Poor But Honest Jerk.'"

Betty squeezed my hand. "I'm marrying purity and goodness." She added smugly, "He doesn't even chase tall sultry sirens. I think it's because he's so much in love with Florence. If it weren't raining I'd show you the lovely big cage he built in the back yard next door for her yesterday. So she'll have room to hop around. When she first came, he was up two nights nursing her, then he couldn't bear to let her go."

Florence was the sparrow who'd made a forced landing in my back yard. She'd been in really bad shape—bruised, beaten, wings and legs broken. She got well, but couldn't fly again. She could only hop around.

"Poor thing," Betty added. "She tried so hard to fly today. But there was only a quiver of wings."

We talked about things like that, and finally Clyde and Doris took off for a movie. Betty put her arms around me.

"Darling," she said, "you're tired. Would you like to go home to bed?"

I told her then that there was a new assignment. She'd learned long ago not to ask details. But she said what she always did:

"Is it very dangerous?"

"Hell, no. But it may keep me away for a few weeks. I'll call you the first chance I get."

Her eyes were suddenly misty, and she held me closer. "Wade, if anything happened to you, I'd—"

"You'd be rich, honey. Ten thousand bucks insurance. I've already got it in your name. I'm worth a fortune dead. You could even buy that new washer."

"Don't talk like that, please!" Her body moved closer. "Do you know that when you leave me like this something chokes up in my chest and I want to cry and cry and cry?"

"Your chest, eh?" I grabbed her. "Is *this* where you feel the pain?"

Her lips touched mine. "Yes, darling. There and all over. I hope we can be married soon. I despise sleeping alone."

"Me, too."

She'd be a good wife, Betty. Loyal, understanding. No suspicions, no nagging. Soothing to be with after the beefs of the day. With her snuggled beside me, holding me, I wasn't missing much.

Now she was taking off her dress. I looked at her.

"Baby, baby, come here."

"Darling," she said, "turn off the light. We'll go to bed and pretend we're already married."

"The hell of it is," I said, "in about thirty minutes we got to pretend it's morning, and go over to my room and pack a suitcase. Then I catch a cab and go to work . . ."

IT WAS STILL raining when the taxi skidded to a stop in front of the White Lion.

From the outside it didn't look like too big a place. There was a small parking lot to one side, a big gaudy neon sign in front, and a green canvas canopy stretching from the sidewalk to the entrance.

I paid off the driver, got out, shook the rain off my coat and hat, picked up my lug-

gage, and went inside.

There was an entry hall with four steps leading down, a strong smell of burnt wood, the nice aroma of charcoal steaks, and a strong whiff of "Tabu" from the direction of the carrot-haired hat-check girl. She bounced to me and helped me off with my coat.

My eyes went to the planting box, with greenery and a lot of circus poles. Beyond was the club, looking like a typical English pub, with a small bar of ten or twelve stools, tables scattered around, about twenty people in the place. Two at the bar, the rest at the tables pushing conversation, or trying to dance.

Judging from the patronage, the White Lion wasn't doing too good. Waiters were fumbling around, rattling dishes and silverware, filling water glasses and looking busy.

At the far end there was a large fireplace, with blue-fringed flames licking through the grate, casting lights and shadows on the dance floor. On the right side of the room between the bandstand and the fireplace was a dark, smooth-polished door with a big brass knob. An eight-piece orchestra was knocking hell out of some piece; I couldn't remember the name of the tune.

A waiter made a rush at me. I nodded toward the bar and kept walking. I parked the suitcase and slid up at the far end. It made three of us sitting there.

About eight stools up a tall bartender was shooting gab with a customer. A little fat bartender moved up in front of me, stood quietly, and studied me with his little black shoe-button eyes. His hair was greasy-black, slicked down, and under the dim light I saw the scar, no wider than a hair's-breadth. It started at his hairline and ran down along his face, across his mouth to the sharp point of his chin.

"Scotch and water," I said.

He nodded and made the drink. He set it on the counter with a thud. I threw down four bits and sat there sipping the Scotch and watching the room through the reflection of the mirror. The little bartender kept vigil there in front of me.

I wondered if he was Al, but I wasn't too curious just yet. I'd ordered a Scotch on

the city's dough—it doesn't happen often—and I wanted to finish it.

"You Al?" I said at last.

He nodded. I squeezed the glass a little and drained the last drop. I asked for Haig & Haig, Silver Label.

He looked at me for a full second, without the flicker of an eyelash. "We got it upstairs," he said. His eyes stayed on me. "Watch the door I take. Don't follow me. I'll meet you at the top of the stairs in five minutes."

He moved over to the tall bartender, whispered something, then ducked under the far side of the bar and up. He walked straight for the door with the big brass knob, opened it, and hurried up the steps.

I played around with my empty glass, smoked a cigarette, and kept my eyes on my watch. In five minutes I got up, ambled across the room, and turned the big brass knob.

III



I CARRIED the suitcase up the green-carpeted stairs with my heart beating against my ribs. Don't let me tell you that I wasn't scared. No cop goes into something like this without wondering if he's going to die young! If there was an inkling of a suspicion that I wasn't Jim Cox there was going to be trouble, and plenty of it!

Al was waiting at the top of the steps. He moved silently down the dimly lighted hall, motioning for me to follow. At the far end, I could see light seeping under a door. Its corrugated upper half was marked:

PRIVATE - OFFICE

Al paused in front of it, glanced at me, and tapped on the glass. There was a grunt from inside. Al turned the knob.

First I saw the gleaming modern furniture, the chrome and mirrors, and green carpeting, red drapes. Then the perfume hit me. It was about the most exotic stuff I'd ever smelled. To my right was a couch, its high back toward me. In front of the couch

television was on. To my left was a desk. Thompson was seated behind it.

He was about fifty, with the balloon look that fat men get. He peered around at me, his third chin hanging over his white shirt collar, resting on the diamond stick-pin in his purple tie. His face was as round as a ball, loose-skinned, and dead-white against the red drapes behind him. His hair was black, straight, with frontal baldness, the forehead sloping. The nose was pug, his ears small and flat. His mouth was large, thick-lipped, and drooped at the corners, giving him a sulking countenance. There was a mole on his left cheek.

The two-hundred-buck blue flannels he was wearing looked like a burlap sack with the potatoes still in it. I noticed his pudgy right hand, with a big diamond on the pinky, holding a green unlit cigar. He looked at me impatiently, and kept glancing at himself in the wall mirror that faced him.

"This is Jim Cox," Al said in his gravel voice.

Thompson turned fully and studied me. "You took enough time getting here." He had a voice like a toy steam engine, all wheeze and blow. He stuck out his flabby right.

I dropped the suitcase, went over and pumped the hand, and watched his little dark eyes shoot to the door. I followed his gaze and saw a tall, thin guy had entered.

He was a serious-faced man with a sharp nose, thin arched lips, a slim, long neck and long pointed devil-ears. His skin was coarse, with a few pock-marks, his eyes pale blue, sadistic, his hair a curly blond-gray, white at the temples. He was square-shouldered in Oxford tweed. He saw me and cocked one eyebrow. It gave him an air of insolence.

"This is Fieldman, Jim," Thompson's voice came over.

I nodded at Fieldman. He nodded back. My gaze went to Thompson, in time to see him give the nod to Al. In a beehive like this, you watch the angles. When Al started his move for my pocket I spun and caught his arm just above the elbow. I kicked him in the knees, pulled him over my back, and

flopped him on the floor. I stood with my foot on his right arm.

"Don't pull that again!" I said quietly. "If you want my gun, ask for it."

I picked him up by the collar and slapped him against the mirrored wall. I held him there and looked down at Thompson. He sat staring, dead-pan, not moving a muscle. Fieldman stood beside him, tight-lipped. Blood was still pounding in my temples. I took Jim's gun from my pocket and threw it on the desk.

THAT was when Thompson laughed. First he sneaked an admiring glance in the mirror. He smiled, then he laughed, his fat belly hanging over his pants, shaking and quivering.

"Say!" he said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "You're all right! That'll teach Al." He grinned up at me with admiration. "Jim Cox, eh?" He gestured to the empty chair by his desk. "Okay, Jim, sit down where I can see you."

I sat. Thompson kept looking at me, then shook his head regretfully. "Humm! Isn't it too bad about Les!"

"Yeah."

He leaned closer, pursed his lips, then said in a confidential tone, "Who got him?"

"Cigarette," a voice said. It was low, husky, and feminine. I didn't see the leg until then, outstretched past the arm of the sofa.

On the other side, a dame was lying on the couch, watching television.

"We got our ideas about Les," I said, trying to think calmly and clearly. "He's—"

My voice died out. Thompson wasn't listening. He was on his feet, moving toward the couch, his gold cigarette case open. I watched long, tapered fingers, with blood-red polish, reach up from behind the couch and select a cigarette. Thompson started back.

"Match, Stupid!" the husky voice snapped.

Thompson whirled and bent over the couch. There was the sound of his lighter clinking open and shut. During this, my eyes went back to the leg. It was as good as Grable's, filmed in a sheer black stocking, tapered thin at the ankle. Everything

a left leg should be. If the right one matched, the dame had legs!

Thompson came back at the desk. "You figure—" he began.

"Turn off the light," the woman's voice interrupted. "And be quiet!"

Thompson sat down. He spoke no louder than a whisper. "Who you figure got Les?"

It was a hell of a good question. "I've got ideas," I said, and tried to look bright. "But you can't be sure."

"Syd Rearden?" Fieldman asked in a smooth, cultured tone. He was still standing at Thompson's right, and behind him Al was posed against the mirrored wall, exactly the way I'd left him.

I lighted a cigarette, stalling, and blew out a thick stream of smoke. "Could be Syd," I said. "Wouldn't surprise me if—"

This time I was thankful for the interruption. The dame's voice was with us again, this time tinged with a slight snarl: "I said turn off the light!"

Thompson sprang to his feet again, spry as a cat, and bounced for the switch at the door. He doused the overhead, then came back, sat down again, and lighted the cigar.

In the dim light of the desk lamp he looked grotesque. When he spoke it was so softly I had to lean closer to hear him.

"Les was a crazy bastard," he was saying, "and a nice guy. We had a hell of a beef in Forty-seven, but he shot square with me. That's when we agreed to help each other out. We—" He broke off, a smile jerking up the second chin. "Did he keep on running around with Peggy? Hell, that woman!"

"That woman is right!" I said with significance, and tried to pass it.

Once more hot fear prickled my scalp. There was a lot I knew about Les Ties, but more that I didn't know. I wondered if this was Thompson's way of catching up with me. What if there'd been no Peggy at all! I looked up at the three grim faces with cold sweat beading my forehead.

"You were in on the last jewelry job?" Thompson asked.

"Hell, yes."

He smiled. "Then I've no qualms about you, kid. That was performance! Just keep

your nose clean around here and you'll work in fine!"

I SAT there nodding. It was like a drama, some scene on a stage or out of a movie. I was part of it! I had lines to speak, and they damned well better not ring phony.

I stubbed out my cigarette. "How long you figure it'll take?"

He shrugged. "A couple weeks maybe." He looked at me. "Any hurry?"

"Have to get back to Chicago," I told him. "I got a deal there that's good. This town stinks! I promised Les, otherwise I wouldn't be here." I could feel my lips twitching.

The smile left Thompson's face. "You're nervous."

I nodded and tried to grin. "A strange setup like this always gives me the shakes. You wonder if you're not hitching up to a pine box."

The dark eyes narrowed. He pointed the cigar at me. "Look, Buster, you don't trust Louie Thompson?"

"Are you kidding!" I said, hard. Words just came out. "I know you're a right guy. Hell! I remember you from way back, when I was a punk with the Red Fossett outfit. Seems to me he took orders from you, and seems to me you could give 'em!"

He sank back in the chair, nodded dreamily, and admired himself in the mirror. "Yeah. Those were the days. Dillinger, Baby-Face Nelson—"

My eyes had shifted to the door beside the television set. I got a glimpse of a kitchen sink. To my left was another door, standing open. I could see beyond into a bedroom.

"Sometimes I wish I was back in the old days," Thompson was saying. He puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "Still working for Capone. With Prohibition and the way Al was running things, a guy could always make a buck." He smiled. "You don't remember much about that, do you?"

"Not much. I've seen Capone a couple times, though, when I was a small-fry selling newspapers."

"I knew him way back," he said with nostalgia. "When he was producer and manager for the Four Deuces. It seems

like yesterday. Two-two-two-two South Wabash." He grinned. "I can still see Al outside in the snow, hustlin', his coat collar turned up, sayin', 'Wouldn't you like to drink some beer with a pretty girl?'" He laughed quietly, the fat shaking.

"That was before my time," I said. "But I ran up against Dillinger once."

"Dillinger?" he reminisced. "He was a good heavy, but he was a butterfly! Always flittin' around dames and bright lights. Didn't know enough to sit tight." He paused. "Me? I always played it safe."

"Yeah," I agreed. "You got yourself a reputation." My eyes wandered to Al and Fieldman. "But I never heard of these guys, and I'm curious."

"Counsel here?" Thompson looked up at Fieldman. "Counsel has brains and guts! Spent seven years in the Bastille. Used to be a top-notch attorney in L. A. Took a fall for narcotics." His eyes moved to Al. "Al's no busher. He's been on the grift all his life." His gaze shifted back to me. "You done any time in stir?"

I shook my head. "Played it too smart."

"Good," he said grimly. "Al there's a hell of a box man. All my men are twenty-four karat. Wouldn't be working for me if they wasn't. You'll meet Tex and Monroe in the morning." His eyes wandered over to the couch. "And Madge there is also twenty-four karat. Relax, kid. You're in for some heavy scratch. Tomorrow morning you'll learn the dope. You're—"

His voice trailed off. He was staring at something on the floor by his desk. His eyes went pale. He turned in his chair and looked slowly up at Al. "I told you over a half-hour ago to mail this."

AL gave him a lopsided grin. "Ever hear of a post-office bein' open this time of night?"

Thompson's lips narrowed into a thin line. "I told you Madge wants it mailed!"

"But, Boss, if the post-office ain't—"

Thompson's voice shot high. "Madge wants it mailed." His lower lip curled. "Tonight!"

Al gave him an ingratiating smile. "Okay, okay, okay." He picked up the box. It was

wrapped for mailing. He staggered a little under its weight, and went on out the door.

Thompson relaxed and nodded toward the couch. "Madge here's got a mother complex. Each week a box of foods got to go to the kids in Europe. Madge says—"

"I say," Fieldman interrupted with dignity, "we should permit Europe to care for their own kids."

The feminine voice shot out from behind the couch: "You say that, Counsel, because you're a filthy selfish pig!"

Fieldman sneered and raised his eyebrows. Thompson chuckled heartily from low in his throat.

Fieldman glanced at his polished fingernails. "Madge is playful tonight," he mused. "Cute as a rattler."

Once more all humor vanished from Thompson's face. Fieldman took one look at him, straightened, then hurried over to the couch.

"Sorry, Madge," he apologized. "No offense."

There was soft sobbing from behind the couch. Thompson got up, went over and looked down. "Don't cry," he said tenderly, as if to a child. "You're just bored. Why don't you go down and sing?"

"Nobody wants to hear me," the dame's voice shot out. "Nobody listens. They go on feeding their mouths and talking. Pay more attention to the juke box than to me. Everybody but you knows I don't have a voice."

"You *have*, Madge," Thompson insisted fervently. "Your voice is beautiful!"

"That's a lie!" she sobbed. "Nobody wants to hear me!"

"I do, Madge." Thompson's voice was sickly sweet. "Sing 'My Heart Stood Still', for me."

"You never listen," she whined. "Nobody listens."

Thompson stood tensely, his lips moving in misery, his face red, bloated, his jaw set. Little veins stood out on the side of his face.

"Well, damn it!" he shouted. "You go down there and sing! And if anybody makes one sound I'll tell 'em! I'll say 'Damn it, this girl is *singing*! And you birds listen!

You birds listen, or get your asses out of here!"

He stood panting. An oppressive quiet closed in. The room suddenly lost its heartbeat. The girl cried on, making little sniffling noises.

Thompson's shoulders slumped. He walked back to his desk and looked at me again, as though seeing me for the first time.

"In the morning," he said morosely, "we'll have breakfast at the Dairy Lunch. On Fourth Street. It's between Howser and Broadway. Meet me inside at nine-thirty."

I nodded and got up. I jabbed Jim's gun back in my pocket and carried my luggage to the door.

"There's no dough until the heist," he wheezed, "unless you need—Hell, I'm squeezed myself, but—"

"I got enough to see me through," I said, and started for the door.

"Say, Jim—"

I turned back to him.

"I've checked with the Hotel Brennan,"

he said. "It's in the next block. They've got a vacancy. Make your quarters there."

I nodded and went out the door, down the hall, down the steps, through the café, and outside.

IV



MY knees were feeling weak as I carried Jim's suitcase through the rain in the direction of the Hotel Brennan. It was the damndest setup I'd ever bumped into! Why the sobbing dame? Why did Thompson humor her,

melt when he talked to her?

I hit the corner drug store and paused, looking at the window display, wondering about calling Roberts. I decided against it. There was plenty of time. The only information so far was that there was definitely going to be a heist, and a hot one if it

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.

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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
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on CBS Wednesday nights.

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would take five guys besides myself. In the morning I'd be the man who came to breakfast and meet the rest of the outfit.

I wondered if Thompson was going to check with Red Fossett, and kicked myself for having said I was once with his mob. I'd have to become more tight-lipped, more impatient to get at the job and back to Chicago.

It was then that I saw the shadow. Little Al, hugging the buildings, a half block behind me, sent by Thompson! I felt cold. Why had Thompson sicked Al on me! A suspicion that I wasn't Jim Cox? Holy hell! Maybe Thompson was play-acting, too! Maybe I'd already tipped my hand! Maybe he was just playing around with me, like a mother lion with her cub, until she gets the idea that the kid's lived long enough!

I hurried on up to the Brennan. Registering at the desk I could feel the little black shoe-button eyes peering from outside the window. The desk clerk's eyes were on me, too. He was a little Greek with patches of black fuzz resting on big flabby ears. Nobody had to tell me that he was being paid by Thompson to keep close tab on me. Calling Roberts from the hotel would be out of the question.

I took the key to 218 and went up. It was a crummy little room. A buck a night. There was a phone, a rug, a rocker, a dresser, a bed, and running water. At least the sheets were clean.

I put the .38 under my pillow, then dug out my bottle of rye from the suitcase. I sat on the bed nursing it, while big splotchy raindrops pelted the windowpane. I listened to the snoring from next door, breathed in the sour, spongy odor of wet must, and watched a big brown spider swing across its web from the ceiling.

I thought about Florence—then about Betty, and how much we both hated sleeping alone. I got undressed. In bed, lights out, I lay awake for a long time wondering about my new business partners. It was disagreeable duty—strictly for the birds! I didn't like it.

There were a lot of things about working for the cops I didn't like. Not that I felt any sympathy for the hardened criminal; I didn't.

Thompson was going to get what had been coming to him for a long time. Sure, they were blind mice, trapped before they started, and I was the executioner, but I didn't think too much about that part. I was too busy worrying about my own hide.

It was a job. Perfunctory. With risk and danger—breakers ahead! You damned well swam or sank! It couldn't be over with fast enough to suit me!

The dame—I thought. A dame always slows things up. What the hell kind of a woman did Thompson have, anyway? A hoodess was usually trustful, loyal, a slave to her master—but with a heart of cobblestone, so hard-bitten she couldn't cry at her own mother's funeral.

Thompson's dame was a babe in arms, throwing tantrums . . .

IN the morning the city was clear and bright after the deluge of rain. I crossed Howser Street and sauntered on up to the Dairy Lunch. It was on an alley facing Fourth—one of those middle-block, deteriorated, ptomaine breeders where each morning some tired chef knocks cockroaches and rat tracks out of the pans and dumps in the soup-du-jour.

I passed the rain- and dirt-streaked windows and went inside. There was a smell of greasy french-fries—big plate side windows, overlooking the garbage cans of the alley. Sunshine streamed in, providing customers with the vitamins boiled out of the chow.

Thompson, Fieldman and Al were already seated off to one side, by the floor-length windows. With them sat a good-looking thug of thirty or so. Black Irish, with an abundance of curly black hair. He was neatly shaved, immaculately dressed in a dark gray suit, white shirt and yellow tie.

To all appearances the four of them might have been business men from any of the nearby office buildings, grabbing a late breakfast. Actually they represented the lowest dregs of humanity, with little left to lose.

Fieldman, a disbarred attorney, seven lost years behind him. Sprung now and ready to risk it all over. Al, too, with a prison

record. And Thompson, a coward, a man of false nerve; bestial, swinish, whose career dated back to Capone; who, through conceit, had played the rackets more slowly, more careful of his hide than most of them, drawing luck all the way. Now again he was running loose because of help from shyster lawyers, pay-offs, and law technicality.

He'd made enough to retire, but had spent it basking under the Miami sun. Short on dough, and burning with the old greed and fever, he was ready for a new kill. I watched him gulp a pork chop down his fat sloppy throat, grease dripping down on the stick pin and onto his tie. He looked up and saw me, his dark eyes wide-awake and shining. There was a glossy ring surrounding the iris.

"Hello, Cox."

I grunted something, nodded to Fieldman, and dropped in the empty chair.

"This is Monroe, Jim."

"Hello, Monroe," I said and got a close-up.

He was of medium build, his face thin and lined, in his dark brown eyes the look of a fanatic. He sat tensely, thin-lipped, energy suppressed within him. It took a terrible patience for him to sit there quietly lapping up hot cakes and sausage.

"Here's Tex," Thompson said, looking toward the entrance.

A big moose, around six-two, with heavy shoulders, thin hips, red hair and freckles, was moving toward us. There was a slow rhythm in his arms and legs. Now, with the air of a vagabond, he pulled up a chair.

"Tex—meet Jim."

"Howdy." His Southern drawl carried a faint lisp.

A weary waitress made her appearance. I ordered Number Seven. Tex mumbled, "Coffee." When she left, Thompson said:

"Jim—"

"Yeah."

"These are the men you'll be working with." He looked at Tex, then Monroe. "If either of you are worrying about Jim here, he was with Les Ties. Says enough, don't it?"

Monroe scratched an armpit, smiled slightly, and studied me. Tex drawled, "It sure

does. Anybody with—"

"We'll all concentrate on our plates," Thompson broke in. "Because we all know the set-up and plans. Except you, Jim." He glanced at his watch, then went on promptly. "You're to look past Fourth, across the alley."

MY EYES came up. I looked out the big plate-glass window. At first I saw only the pedestrians — office girls, shoppers, couples, the slow drag of traffic. Across Fourth the alley continued and then, cater-cornered to the Dairy Lunch, I saw the rear of the big Southwest Bank, with its iron grilled windows, its impenetrable steel slab door that could be opened only from the inside.

"Ever hear of Western Money Transport, Incorporated, Jim?"

I felt short of breath. I sat stiffly, trying to keep my face expressionless. "Vaguely," I answered.

Thompson's voice was a purr. "They handle all the dough that goes to the parimutuel windows at the track."

I nodded, feeling my heart take on an extra beat. The waitress was back now, setting down my Number Seven, and coffee before Tex.

After she moved off, Thompson sat quietly, his back to the windows. He glanced at his watch again, then his voice dropped to a whisper.

"There's an armored truck pulling up at the rear of the bank."

"Yeah," I breathed, and wondered if he knew the rest!

The truck was turret-topped; glass windows, with a guard alongside the driver. On the rear were small round ports to stick gun barrels through. A second guard was riding the rear.

I watched awkwardly while Thompson took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. "What you suppose they're carrying in the way of artillery?" his voice purred.

"Probably pump shotguns and forty-fives," I mumbled. "Or thirty-eights."

His eyes were on his wrist watch. "In a minute the rear guard will go to the back

door of the bank. He'll say 'Open Sesame' to the bank guard. The truck driver and a guard from the bank will start loading the dough. The other two are watch dogs." He sank back, his eyes suddenly glassy. "Over a million bucks take!" he wheezed.

I wondered if any of them could hear the hammering of my heart.

Fieldman leaned toward me. His smile was sickly, and he was breathing too hard. "They have such a heavy load that we're going to help them carry it!"

A nervous, ugly little smile twisted Thompson's lips. He held up his coffee cup with the pinky raised, the diamond glittering too bright. "The scratch isn't marked. It's baled in bills. The complete pay-off for a day at the races!" His eyes flickered. "We're the guys at the window, with a win ticket for over a million!" He swallowed; his voice trembled so that he could scarcely speak: "Split seven ways it's still a lot of walking-around money!"

I found my voice. "I only count six of us. Who gets the seventh slice?"

Thompson's mouth jumped. "I get two satchels. That's all there is to it." His face and neck got red. "If you don't like it, speak your piece now. It's okay with Tex and Monroe. We've already talked it over. After all, you're a late-comer. I get two satchels, kid."

"Just thought I'd ask," I said. "It's okay by me."

I was doing some heavy thinking about the seventh satchel. I wondered if there was a voice over Thompson. It was something that Captain Roberts hadn't figured when he briefed me.

"Keep your eye on the ball, Cox."

I looked back out the window.

"Notice," Thompson wheezed, "the driver getting out of the truck and walking over to lean against the wall of the bank building. He's got a bird gun, probably a twelve-gauge. He can't use it because he's spending too much time doing other things. Watch him. You'll see."

"Who does the drill job?" I blurted nervously.

There was a dead silence. They all looked at me.

"WHAT drill job?" Thompson asked with a touch of exasperation.

"The one on the truck," I said. "They—they're like a safe, aren't they?"

Monroe smiled. "No drill job to it." His voice was husky and toneless. "You'll see that when you learn how it's planned."

Thompson leaned forward. "Watch closely. One of the truck bulls is inside the bank signing for the dough. That leaves the two guards, one leaning against the building; the other one is asleep at the front of the truck. They think their job's a pension. We'll catch them flat-footed. They haven't had a knock-over in nine years. Watch Buster there, keeping his eyes peeled for anything in skirts that's coming up Fourth Street. In his mind he can probably undress a woman faster than anybody." He grunted a laugh.

"Yeah."

Thompson relaxed. I picked up my coffee cup, then set it down quick. My hand was shaking like I had palsy.

"Every day the same," Thompson went on softly. "It's a drop-in. Sweetest setup I ever saw." He lighted a half-buck cigar. "Okay, Jim, that's it. Meet me at my place in fifteen minutes. You'll see how the plan goes." He rose abruptly, then hesitated. "Better make it a half hour. I've got business to attend to."

He moved off, Fieldman and Al close behind. I sat there numbly with Monroe and Tex. A dead silence closed in.

"Glad you're with us, Cox," Tex finally said, breaking the gloom.

"Thanks," I managed.

He turned to Monroe. "Heard from Dorothy yet?"

Monroe shook his head grimly.

"You will," Tex assured him.

Monroe rose to his feet. "I will in a pig's eye!" He picked up his coat and moved off toward the entrance.

Tex still sat there, leisurely sipping his coffee. He nodded after Monroe. "His woman left him a couple weeks ago."

"Too bad," I said.

He sighed and gazed thoughtfully at his cup. "Dames are like bees. Buzz around a guy till the honey's gone."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"But Monroe is still hoping. Thinks when this job's over and he's on the plush she'll come running back." He sighed again. "Guess no guy gets in on something as big as this except for a reason." He looked at me. "And the reason's always a dame. Take Fieldman. The guy's lost a bolt. Needs dough to set up a little broad in the dress-manufacturing business. She's fetish for a needle."

"How about Thompson?" I said. "I thought he was through."

Tex shrugged. "What do you do when you're stone broke? He's got a bunch of bum paper out. All because of some phony society dame in Miami." He paused in thought. "I'm telling you it's all for dames that guys risk their necks!"

"How about you, Tex?"

"Me?" He grinned. "Let's say I'm doing it for a horse. I'm itchin' to buy back a ranch that a loan outfit stole from my old man."

"Well, here's luck," I said.

He nodded. "We'll need it. We'll shore be needin' it." He glanced out the window to the armored truck. "Too big, I'm afraid." He eyed me. "Nothin' had better go wrong."

He left.

I sat there in a cold sweat, watching the truck bulls load the dough—sack after sack.

Over a million bucks!

V



WHEN I left the Dairy Lunch the truck was backing out of the alley, heading west on its way to the track. It was then that I glimpsed Al again. He was standing across the street at the corner newsstand. From what I could

judge he was the guy to watch—Thompson's stoolie, errand boy, guard, and tail man. Including being the night bartender when there was nothing else for him to do.

I crossed Fourth Street and boarded a streetcar back to the White Lion. I watched Al, in pantomime, still at the corner, screaming for a cab to stop. In a minute he'd be

hot on my trail wherever it might lead.

Roberts was going to have to sit and sweat until I could find a phone without Al counting the dial clicks.

This time, though, I got to the White Lion before he did, and when I went straight through the bar, opened the door with the big brass knob and hurried upstairs, there was soft masculine humming from inside the door marked "PRIVATE—OFFICE." I cleared my throat and knocked.

Then she stood before me.

The right leg matched the left just fine, and they were even better in a vertical position. She was a babe, all right. Long, shining red hair, past her shoulders. Large gray-greenish eyes with an impudent look, the lids darkened with green shadow, the lashes thick with mascara, skin too white.

Her mouth was full and sensual, glistening with too much brilliant orange paint. A voluptuous body in a white silk dress cut so tight you could see the nipples of her full ripe breasts. If you had the time you could even see the bone structure, and the muscles of her thighs. She wore no bra, and there was no pantie line.

She stared up at me, a little longer than seemed necessary, and I guess I was working overtime myself. She put her hands on her hips and, with grace and arrogance, threw back her head.

Then, with an air of importance she said: "Who are you, may I ask?"

The voice was about five shades too low. One of those sexy tough voices that she'd copied out of some movie. I'd seen her kind before—when the Vice Squad rooted a nest of them out of their rooms and checked them into the wagon while their madame screeched like a parrot. Evidently she hadn't been aware of my presence last night, didn't know that I'd already seen her or, that is, part of her. She didn't know that I already had her tabbed.

"I'm Jim Cox," I said. "Thompson wants to see me."

Her expression changed. "You—you're Jim Cox?" She preened before me, showing off her wares. "Oh, yes, come in. Louie did speak of you, the new—drummer—from Chicago. I'm Madge Morton, and

this"—she gestured to a little guy sitting on a chair by the couch—"is Dr. Sloan."

The little man was somewhere in his late forties, with a weak face, a mean, loose mouth; and the eyes were brown and sensitive and shone too bright. I pegged him—a snow bird. The tan suit he was wearing was unpressed and baggy, knees worn thin, shoulder pads hanging. A beat-up brown felt that he must have had in college was smashed down over his hair.

He looked dirty, inefficient, the kind of a doctor I wouldn't let cut my toe-nails. He sat there quietly, humming softly and sucking on his long upper lip, drumming his fingers against the small black satchel he held in his lap.

"Hi," he said, and went on humming.

She gestured impatiently. "Sit down, Jim. Louie won't be long. Take a load off your feet." She looked me over. "Quite a load at that. My guess is two hundred."

"Two twenty," I said drily.

SHE picked up a cigarette from the desk and lighted it. She kept looking at me. Her eyes came up slowly—with meaning behind them. "I always say the bigger they come the harder they fall."

I met her gaze. "I don't trip easily."

She laughed low in her throat. Her eyelids glistened. "I'll bet you don't trip easy, Jim," she said in her slow, hard, phony voice. "I'll bet all a girl's got to do is wink."

I pulled my eyes off her, and saw that the doc was taking it all in. I walked away from her and went over to a chair by the window. "I'll wait for Thompson," I said.

She moved closer. "I really don't know when to expect him," she said sweetly. "I know nothing of Louie's affairs." She smiled coyly. "You see, I just sing here." She struck a prima donna pose. "I'm the new singer."

A torrent of laughter shook the room. "Ha—ha—ha!" The little doc held his sides. "That's a hot one! The new singer, eh? If you're a singer I'm an acrobat team."

She winced, turned slowly and stared at him, blood draining from her face. "I am!" she cried with vehemence. "I'm a singer! I once sang with a twenty-piece band!"

"Salvation Army?" Doc said, and went into another convulsion of laughter.

She waved her arms furiously; little darts of fire flew from her eyes. "I'm a *singer*!" she panted. Her breasts quivered. "Dammit, I am! I even sang at the Roxy! You two-bit ex-abortionist, what would *you* know about singing!"

The doc sobered fast. He paled, then shrugged.

"Hell," he said, "maybe you sang in a church choir if you feel any better."

She kept staring at him, still panting, with tears of fury in her eyes. "I'm asking you!" she shouted. "Tell me what you know about singing!"

"I—" he swallowed hard—"I used to sing in a choir myself."

She whirled to me. "Somebody ought to tell him what a son-of-a-bitch he is!" She tried to smile. "Knows all about music, Doc here. Hatched in Harlem. Used to have his own mob of hijackers, thieves and narcotic peddlers." She laughed a little hysterically. "How many patients now, Doc?"

"Go to hell," he said.

She bristled; words gushed out: "Quite a clientèle, haven't you? People begging and stealing for your morphine." She turned to me, her voice deeply sarcastic. "The doctor is a specialist now. In plastic surgery and bullet extraction."

He shot to his feet and hurried to the door. "You got too much energy, kid!" He slammed the door behind him.

There was a dead silence. Through it I heard the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall, growing closer. When she spoke again her voice was hard and bitter:

"I know why you're here, Jim. To join our lovely little family." A deep sob escaped her lips, shaking her body. "Don't mind me. I cry at least once a day."

She left the room just as Thompson came in, with Fieldman and the little doc trailing in behind him.

Fieldman pulled off his top-coat. Thompson threw his hat on a chair and grinned at me. "Sit tight for a second, Jim. Got to get my Vitamin-B shot." He turned to the doc. "Hurry it up. I got business on hand."

I watched the doc open his satchel and

fumble for a second. He brought out a hypodermic needle and hurried over to Thompson.

"Don't point that thing at me," Thompson told him.

The doc sighed with weary patience. "Take down your pants."

THOMPSON unbuckled his belt while casting uneasy glances at the needle in Doc's hand. He pulled down his trousers

DOGGONE!



ALTHOUGH dogs are supposed to be our best friends, sometimes they get humans into trouble. That's what happened to a salesman named Harold Martin, who was convicted in Los Angeles on the charge of stealing a couple of expensive and highly-bred canines. When the truth came out, he was finally acquitted, but it wasn't easy for him to prove that the collie and great Dane had entered his car of their own free will. As a matter of fact, he couldn't keep them out, since Mr. Martin's occupation consists of peddling dog food, and his clothing was heavily perfumed with the product.

Another case in point which seems to indicate that a pup is not always a man's best pal took place in Montgomery, Alabama. This time the prisoner wasn't let off until he paid a fine of ten hard-earned bucks. It seems that Mr. Martin D. Perry, who shelled out the cash, was kept awake constantly by neighboring hounds, with their perpetual barking. All Mr. Perry did in return was sit on his front porch and howl back.

—Bess Ritter

and bent over. "How do I know that thing ain't got germ warfare in it instead of Vitamin-B," he whined.

Doc laughed and advanced with the needle.

"Go easy—watch it—careful," Thompson kept saying, and then yelled like a woman

as the doc stuck the needle into his fat right buttock.

In a minute the needle was pulled out, and Thompson was brushing the thin film of sweat off his upper lip and buttoning up his trousers. The doc looked at me and chuckled.

"A good man, Thompson," he said. His voice lowered. "But he squeals like a pig when he's stuck." He looked back at his victim. "Got something big in the fire, haven't you, Louie?"

"Nuts," Thompson told him.

Doc was packing his needle. "Oh, yeah. I can always tell by your eyes when something's stewing." He slammed the satchel shut. "Don't worry. I want no part of it. I'm glad you tossed me out."

Thompson pulled up his zipper. "You proved your worth last time. As I remember, just as I needed you, you were caught in a snowstorm."

Doc looked at him uneasily. "That was five years ago. Now I've grown up."

Thompson's eyes contracted to pin-points. "You'll never grow up, Doc. You like your own needle too well."

Doc laughed. "Some day you'll want a favor from me. You'll want me to remodel your features—like I did with Bobbie Altman."

"I like my looks," Thompson told him. He rubbed his chin in thought, then grinned. "You ought to have heard Johnny Dillinger tell how the butchers almost killed him." He gestured with his cigar. "In the middle of the face-lift his pumper stopped!" He looked at me, the grin spreading. "Honest to God. A good five seconds he died before one of the docs had sense to grab his tongue and jab an elbow in his ribs. They told Johnny about it after the operation. It cost him five grand."

"Where he is now," the little doc chimed in, "he don't have to worry about it." He marched to the door, saluted, said, "See you next week, Louie. Prepare to turn the other cheek."

He made his exit, the black satchel bumping his knees.

Thompson looked after him. "I've known that little croaker for ten years," he said

slowly. "And I still don't trust him." He shrugged it off and grinned again at me. "Maybe it's the needle. Come on over here, Jim." He rubbed his right buttock and sat at his desk in contemplation.

I got up and sat down facing him. Fieldman stood quietly.

"Okay," Thompson said, "here's the deal. It's going to take sweat and a lot of work, but it's worth it. Nobody's in the middle. It's a frolic for all."

He clapped his fat hands together, and got up. He opened a small wall safe, concealed behind the red drapes, brought out a paper, and slapped it down on the desk facing me. I saw that it was a crudely drawn map, showing the area around the Southwest Bank, the alley, buildings and streets. He picked up a pencil, squinted, and dropped its tip on the building marked "B."

"Here's the bank," he explained. "Here, across the alley, is the rear of the Coolidge Building, its arcade running through from Fifth Street—"

HIS voice ground on. I listened to the whole fantastic plan, the 'set-up, what each of us was to do, how it timed out, the precision of it. The more he talked the less fantastic it became. For a million bucks those guys could do a lot of planning. I sat there, thinking about the energy that they were spending on the thing. If they'd put it into legitimate work they'd all be rich.

"Fieldman will drive," he was saying in short, clipped tones. "He'll drop Tex on Jlowser. Tex will walk down the alley to the rear of the bank, a two-minute walk. Monroe will get out here, across the street from the alley. You'll get out in front of the Arcade—use two minutes in getting through to the alley. In that time Fieldman will drive on, turn down to the bank and wait to follow the truck out. Tex will drive the truck down to the Bank of America, three blocks down. Corner of Sixth and Oak. You'll unload the truck there. Right in front of the public. That way it ain't gonna cause any comment. Average people will think they're delivering money to the bank. You go, it straight?"

"Yeah, yeah." I was sweating. "I hope

the keys are in the truck."

He nodded confidently. "Tex checked it careful. The keys have been in the ignition every morning so far. All Tex does is drive it out." He went on, "Fieldman will have suitcases in the car. Also some G.I. coveralls for you guys to slip on over your Brownie outfits."

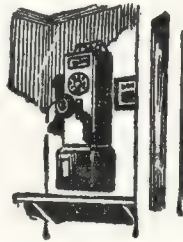
"Brownie outfits?"

"Hell, yes. You guys'll be outfitted just like the truck guards. By the way, I want your shirt and trouser measurements so's Fieldman can pick up your uniform this afternoon. We get 'em at the Union Outfitting Company; they carry a big stock."

"Thirty-seven-trouser length," I said. "Sixteen shirt. Thirty-four sleeves."

He wrote it down, then looked up thoughtfully. "At the Bank of America Fieldman will pull up in back of the truck and you'll load. Then he'll bring you guys and the dough to me at a little motel I've picked out."

VI



THERE was a sudden loud buzzing in the room. Thompson got up and walked over to a table. He picked up the cream-colored house phone. He listened for a second, grunted something about a shortage on the liquor order. He slammed down the receiver, then turned back to me.

"Study the map, Jim. If you get any good ideas, let me know. I'll be downstairs for a minute."

Fieldman left with him.

Then she came back in. I could feel her. I didn't look up, but I could hear her. She tore out a match from a book and lighted a cigarette. Then her voice came:

"I don't know why I said I was a singer here."

"That's all right," I said.

There was a dead silence. I could hear her breathing.

"You know I'm Louie's girl, don't you?"

I nodded.

She straightened. "Well, he's a nice guy. Don't make 'em any better than Louie Thompson." She went over to the window and stood quietly. "I got nothing to be ashamed of." She paused. "I'm proud of it." There was another silence. I could feel energy burning inside her. "This job's got to go right, Jim."

"Yeah."

She took a quick breath. "When it's over, Louie's taking me on a Caribbean cruise. Then we're going to come back and start living. We might even get married, I don't know." She shrugged, with a heave of her chest. "He wants to bad enough. I guess a girl could do worse. He—he's a nice enough guy." She looked at me for assurance.

"A nice guy," I said.

She nodded and tried to believe it. "I guess having kids by him wouldn't be so bad." She paused in thought; her eyes lost their light. "Sometimes kids are real cute even when the old man is a pot-bellied freak and a creep." She wet her lips. "You—you

think kids by Louie might be okay?"

"Hell, yes. He's a swell guy."

Her voice dropped. "He's a little man who must feel important. Now he's playing second fiddle, and doesn't like it."

I nodded and took a chance. "I know—there's a big boss. In New York, eh?"

"No," she said. "He's right here in town." She walked over to the wall mirror. "Louie wants just this one final chance at big-time. Says he's learned not to blow his dough. He'll save it and try to invest right." She studied herself in the mirror. "Maybe this *isn't* all a pipe dream. Maybe I'm the kind of dame that *should* marry a walrus. Hell, maybe marriage *is* in the cards."

There was the sound of a door clicking shut down the hall, and now Thompson's voice in the hall.

"I always wanted to get married," she said. "I guess any girl does." She crushed out her cigarette in the desk tray and moved slowly to the bedroom door. She turned to me.

[Turn page]



"And now to my nephew, Eugene, I leave my bottle of Wildroot Cream-Oil, my hair's best friend!"



"Wildroot Cream-Oil relieves dryness so well, you only need a drink every fourteen days!"



"I'll bet 29¢ Wildroot Cream-Oil does it better!"

**YOUR HAIR'S
BEST FRIEND**

**America's
Favorite
Hair Tonic!**



"I even know how to make bread," she said.

She left. I just sat there. And then the door opened and Thompson came in.

His eyes shone. "Any questions?"

"Yeah. When does it come off?"

He flopped down behind the desk. "You'll know in plenty of time. In the morning I want you guys to meet and time the distance from all points."

"Rehearsal, eh?"

He nodded. "We can use it. It's got to work like Swiss movement. No bloomers. None of my boys are winding up on the cold meat cart! We don't want this to curdle. Fieldman will pick you up in front of your hotel at nine in the morning." He cleared his throat. "Check in with me when you're through. . . ."

THAT night I called Roberts at his home.

He answered the phone.

"This is Wade, Captain."

"Where the hell are you?"

"A little drug store on First Street. I've spent two hours going 'round in circles to ditch my tail."

"Yeah, Wade?" he said anxiously. "What are the developments?"

"It's a bank job. A honey. Hold on to your hat! A million bucks involved!" I could hear him let out his breath. "Six in on the take, plus a dame on the outside but in on the know." I hurried on, "A big boss we never figured. I'll have the finger on him soon. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

"If Louie's running stuff," I went on, "I've got the little doc that's probably supplying it."

"When do we close?" he asked calmly.

"Time's not set. Sit tight and wait. I'm sitting on a pin myself." I paused. "The dame's poison. But it's from her that I'll get the brains."

"A little soft talk," he said, "and a woman comes through. When can I expect the dope?"

"Won't be long now."

"Good work, boy. Be careful."

"Thanks. If I can't see you personally, I'll drop a report in the mail. They're watch-

ing me close. If you don't hear from me for a couple days don't worry. You'll know the date in advance."

"Okay," he said.

"You still got Jim Cox—I hope?"

He laughed. "Yeah. Don't worry."

"You'll be hearing from me," I said.

I hung the receiver up, then lifted it and dialed again.

"Darling!" Betty said. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I can't talk long. Stop worrying."

"I'm not worrying. Dearest?"

"Yeah."

"I miss you so."

"I'm glad, honey."

"Think you'll be home soon?"

"A week at the most should see me through."

"Are you taking care of yourself?"

"Of course, Betty, I'm fine."

"Oh, Wade—Florence almost flew today. She's trying again."

"Give her my congratulations."

"She seems to have new courage."

"Swell. I'll call you again first chance."

"Good night sweetheart."

"Good night, sweetheart," I said. . . .

At nine the next morning Fieldman pulled up to the curb outside the Hotel Brennan. I made a mental note of the license plates, and threw open the door of the black Chrysler sedan.

He pulled out, saying that we'd first pick up Tex and Monroe. We turned right, and traveled east on Fletcher Drive until he stopped in front of a modern green-and-white apartment building—the Fletcher Arms.

Monroe was waiting outside. He hurried over and hopped in the back seat. Fieldman drove on, turning left on Main Street. He stopped a few doors from the corner, then parked in front of the hotel while Monroe went inside and got Tex.

NEXT the four of us were parked across the street from the Coolidge Building. Fieldman was off on a tangent about nerves—said anything was possible if a guy kept his guts. He went on about the artillery we'd be carrying, and finally glanced at

his watch. Then he looked at me.

"Let's get a time hack," he said. "It's nine-thirty-five. In five seconds it'll be nine thirty-six. Set your watches." He looked at me. "Jim, you go first. At exactly nine forty-seven you get out and walk leisurely through the Arcade. You'll see how it's timed so that you'll all meet in the alley."

He kept looking at his watch. Then he gave me the signal.

"Okay," he said softly. "Get going."

I got out. He started the car and drove off. I went across Fourth Street and entered the Arcade. I passed a liquor store at the entrance, a dress shop, a barber shop—people. It was easy, because it wasn't real.

The armored truck was in the alley. Tex was coming down the alley to my right, Monroe closing in to my left. We ignored each other. Tex passed close to the truck, glancing in at the ignition.

I retraced my steps, back through the Coolidge Building Arcade. In a minute Fieldman pulled up, with Tex and Monroe in the back seat.

I climbed in.

"The key was there," Tex said. "It's always there."

"About the right timing, wasn't it?" Monroe put in.

"I got there a fraction too soon," I told him. "I can stall a few seconds longer until Tex moves in closer."

"It'll work," Tex said uncertainly. "We'd better not go through it again. All we need now is for some smart cookie to get wise."

"I'll drop you guys back," Fieldman said. "Then I've got things to do." He looked at me. "Check in with Thompson. He's waiting for you."

I got out and caught a streetcar back down Fourth Street.

I found Thompson alone, his face neatly shaved, shining, and stinking of heavy cologne. He was seated behind his desk, sipping coffee and holding a green panatella. He was wearing a red-and-green striped, brocaded satin robe.

"How'd it go?" He looked sleepy, but his voice was wide-awake.

I sat down facing him. "It's clocked as far as I'm concerned. I made it through the

Arcade a little before Tex and Monroe made their debut." I lighted a cigarette. "I've got to take it slower on the approach."

He blinked up. "Anything bothering you?"

I shrugged. "This is one of those luck pieces. If we make it it's got to run like oil."

His voice lost its sharpness. "What's the main worry?"

"Bank guards," I told him. "If we don't make a fast getaway we'll have them piggy-back. Besides that, they shoot—and their guns have got real bullets."

His eyes burned bright. "That's why the timing's got to go right." He sucked on his cigar. "We don't want anybody killed. It costs money for flowers."

"Yeah. Stiffs look funny, don't they? They always powder their faces." I crushed out my cigarette in the tray. "It's not for me." I licked my dry lips. "If we don't have to use heat at all it's best."

He scratched his chin in thought. "What about a plainclothes car that might screw up the party?"

I looked at him, feeling a muscle moving in my cheek.

"A lot of dicks eat at the Dairy lunch," he said.

"Oh," I said, and let out my breath.

"I want you to hang around the alley for a few mornings checking on that."

MY VOICE was weak. "How could I tell dicks from the citizens?"

"It's easy," he wheezed. "They usually work in pairs with their eyes open at the scenery. Hell, you can smell 'em." He thought for a moment. "Tell you what—there's a little shoe repair shop and shine parlor across the alley from the bank. You can get a shine there for a few mornings at nine forty-five and keep your gims open for bulls—any variety. A few days' watch ought to put us straight."

I nodded.

"Another thing," he said, "we've got to have suitcases." He stood up and threw two sawbucks on the desk. "Get a couple made of cheap press paper with snaps on 'em. They have to be at least two and a half feet long and eighteen inches deep, with a ten-

inch fold. That should take care of transportation of the take from the truck."

There was a silence.

"That's all, Jim."

I picked up the sawbucks.

"Bring back the change," he said.

I started for the door.

"Say, Cox—"

I turned back.

He bit his lower lip in thought. "I've got things that have to be attended to. Al's busy, too. Madge wants to do a little shopping. So you drive her."

"I—"

He saw my expression. "You can't start checking until tomorrow morning." He gave me one of his sickly sloppy smiles, and handed me a car key. "Wait for her down in back. She'll show you where my car is."

I waited in the alley in rear of the White Lion. In about a half-hour she came strutting down the back stairs, heels too high. She wore a little piece of mink hat. Her dress was red, too tight. A three-quarter mink was flying behind her.

Miss Rich Bitch, or something.

VII



SHE still had on too much makeup, and she had the too-important air again. She looked at me as if I'd just been hatched out.

"Why haven't you got the car out?" she said. "It's in the first garage."

I lifted the garage door, backed out, leaned across the seat and let her in. It was a hell of a nice Cad; it drove like a baby buggy down the bumpy alley.

I turned and took Fifth, and felt suffocated with her perfume.

"My first stop," she said, "is a little glove shop. Six-two-three Sixth Street."

I nodded and drove on, weaving in and out of noontime traffic. When I made the turn over to Sixth, I could feel her eyes on me.

"How'd a nice guy like you ever get mixed up with this outfit?"

"I might ask you the same question," I said.

She gave a short harsh laugh. "Concentration. Hard work. Something I set my heart on. A calling. At five years old every other little girl in my block wanted to be a nun, a teacher, or an actress. Not me. I wanted to be Dillinger's girl friend."

I glanced at her. "Is it an effort-to be so sarcastic—or does it come easy?"

She glanced at her fire-engine-red polished nails. "I got mixed up a long time ago. It began the usual way." Her voice was matter-of-fact. "The usual no-good guy that a sixteen-year-old falls in love with and believed it when he said he made his money gambling. I went away with him and when I woke up it was too late." She looked at me. "Same old story, isn't it? Right out of a prostitute's Bible. You've heard it before." She shrugged. "Only this time it's true. If you don't believe it, go to hell."

"Why didn't you get out?"

"I was in love," she said.

"Continue," I said. "It's touching."

She laughed again; it cracked. "If you cry, use the street. Louie wouldn't like his car all wet up."

"I'll control it," I said.

Her voice dropped lower. "The man I loved was killed. A gun battle. And it wasn't the war. It was a cheap little clothing store stickup off Broadway."

"I see," I said. "And now Thompson lets you cry on his shoulder?"

Her voice was brittle. "After Don, I went farther downhill. And one night there was Louie—begging to buy me mink."

"A nice guy," I said, and pulled up before 623.

"Yeah," she said faintly. "A nice guy."

She opened the car door and got out. "I'll be only a minute." She went inside the shop.

I sat behind the wheel, waiting—the longest minute I'd ever spent. I wondered how I was going to learn the identity of the brains. And then I thought about the curve of her legs, the way her hair shone red-gold in the sunlight, and the body underneath that red dress. I tried to stop, but my subconscious took over and got down to real hard thinking.

She came out carrying a small pink sack. Like a good chauffeur, I jumped out and opened the door for her. She accepted it with a tilt of her nose, and when I was back around in the driver's seat, she said:

"Now my dress shop. It's on Eighth, near Princeton. I have some suits ordered."

THE SHOP was across the street from Lakeside Park. She got out again. I sat watching the lake, the people, the frowns they had, until she came back out.

"We'll have to wait," she informed me. "My suits aren't quite ready. It'll be half an hour."

I helped her back in, and gestured toward the park. "Then we got time to drive over there and look at the water and the pheasants."

She didn't say anything, so I started the motor and turned in the driveway. I pulled close to the lake. There wasn't a swan in sight—just a few canoes going by, early afternoon sun on the lake, a blue sky, and a warm breeze shuffling the palms. Directly beyond us were a lot of cat-tails, and old people who were busy reading their papers and poetry.

I cut off the motor and sat there a moment, morosely, wondering how old I'd get to be.

"What are you worried about?" she said.

I heaved a sigh. "The voice. I don't like poking around in the dark." I brought it out casually. "Who is he?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Louie doesn't want it known."

I slid down a little lower under the wheel and stretched out my arms. My right rested on the back of the seat behind her. It surprised her.

"What's that for?" she said.

I'd done it without thinking—I guess. But now it seemed a good idea. A little buttering up, Roberts had said. And with one look at her breasts I didn't have to strain to do it.

"Madge Morton," I said dreamily. "That's a pretty name."

"I hated it when I was a kid," she said without smiling.

"I've used half a dozen others, and then I went back to the original—I don't know why."

"I like you," I said.

She straightened. "Don't let it show."

"Why not?" I smiled at her. "When I like something I want to hold it."

She wet her lips; they glistened. "You're just an unhappy lonesome guy."

"Yeah," I breathed, and rested my head back on the seat. "When I'm alone in my room I think too much about you."

"Me?"

I had a feeling that I was six speeds ahead of myself, but words just came out. "I like your straight-forward answers. Anything I hate is a deceitful dame." I caught the curve of her ankle. "There's a lot of things I like about you."

"Don't get ideas," she said harshly.

I shook my head. "You're too nice a kid for that. It's just that—oh hell, sometimes a guy gets to thinking that he's a long time gone. Funerals are permanent."

Her eyes darkened. "Why do you say that?"

I tapped my fingers on the wheel and tried to look like a guy haunted with fear. "This deal I'm in, this job. Just a funny feeling you get in the pit of your stomach that there's a deadfall ahead. Just something that tells you. It's a whisper."

She turned in the seat and looked at me. Her eyes were wide. "I—I've felt it, too. A hunch. I told Louie and he laughed at me, but I—I feel it, too!" A shiver went through her.

"Yeah. Well, I guess nobody lives forever."

SHE was breathing a little harder. "Then why don't you get out of it, Jim?"

I grunted a laugh. "And leave all of those swell guys in the dark? Louie—Tex—Monroe. Ever hear of honor among thieves?"

"There's no such thing," she said quietly. "If I were you I'd get out." Her voice dropped. "You don't belong in the forest. You'll get lost."

I wondered what she meant about the forest. She leaned closer.

"Louie told me about your past. It's hard

to believe. But then I guess looks are deceiving."

"Thanks, honey."

Her voice was toneless. "You better get out while you can."

I rubbed my hand down over my face and tried to look worried again. "Some guys can. But my old man's dead, and my old lady's never had a home. She's always lived in a joint and had to take in washings. My main object is to buy her a house—pay cash for it. That way she's got no worries." I took a breath. "In that forest you mentioned, there's still a lot of wood to be chopped. I plan on cutting a few chips."

She was very sober. "And it's for *her* that—"

I nodded and looked grim. "For her. Those chips will buy her a lot of things."

There was a dead silence, an awkward silence. I could feel her pitying me. Then her voice said quietly:

"Put your arm back around me, Jim."

I had got it half-way there when she kissed me—full on the mouth. Her lips were warm and soft and vibrant. I felt the blood pounding up in my ears. And then she was close beside me, her voice a little desperate.

"Why do you think I decided to go shopping today? I knew Louie and Al were busy. I knew you'd be there. I asked Louie to have you drive me."

"I'm glad, honey."

Her eyes shone. "Think I haven't thought about *you*? How clean and nice you are? How fine and strong your shoulders are? Thinking of you alone up there in your room. I *hate* being alone."

"Yeah."

"It's like being in a cavern, with no light or air, your own voice echoing in your ears."

"Yeah. You hit it just right."

She kissed me again, then she laughed, a warm young lovely laugh. Then suddenly she sobered; her voice was low and hard again.

"You think Thompson's my answer?" She drew a quick breath. "Think I'm not sick of his thick sloppy lips stinking of garlic and cigars? Think it's ecstasy when he grabs me, his eyes all lit up? Think my flesh don't crawl at his touch? Think I'm not

sick of making up excuses night after night?" She laughed a little hysterically.

I said, "You just need the right guy. Your nerves are all shot."

She nodded and sank back in the seat and closed her eyes. "Why don't you ask me why *I* don't get out? Why don't *I*?"

"Okay," I said, "why don't you?"

"I guess I'm just sick, Jim," she said wearily. "I haven't got the guts to go out and get an honest job and fight the world alone. I haven't got the ambition. I don't care enough, I guess."

I LOOKED at her. "Haven't you got folks? Why don't you go home?"

"I got folks," she said wearily. "In Cheyenne. The old man's a hard-headed Irishman, thinks I've disgraced the family and I'm not fit to be around them any more. I wrote a couple times and asked him." Her eyes opened slowly. "And if he'd let me—then what? I can't cry on my mother's bosom and tell her that the world she brought me into is a cold, unhealthy place, and that I'm afraid of the dark." She shook her head. "I'm a big girl now."

"You sure are."

She pressed my hand. "I wake up in the night feeling depressed. I get up, turn on a light, smoke, go crazy, get bent out of shape—all the while afraid of the sounds of the night and its darkness. I get back in bed and die all over again."

I pulled her close. I rubbed her hair and kissed her again. Her lips were on fire.

"Last night," she said softly, "I wanted to come to your hotel room. I tried to think of some excuse that I had to talk to you about something."

I swallowed hard. "You—you did?"

"Yes. But I didn't know the number of your room. And I couldn't pass Pete."

"The Greek night clerk?"

"Yes. He calls in a report to Louie on you every morning."

I felt cold. "Why? Doesn't Louie trust me?"

"He doesn't trust anybody, except me. That's because love is awful blind. He says there's always a chance of a guy losing his nerve in a big deal. He—he had Al watching you, too. But now he's called Al off. What

is your room number, Jim? Isn't there a back stairs?"

"Look, baby, you don't want to do that! Risk everything you've got with Louie, a swell guy like that—to—to— You *can't* come to my room! It's impossible! It's not only impossible, it's fantastic, it's— Come to think about it, there is a fire-escape. You have to climb three flights because the joint is built on the side of a hill and—" I was breathing too hard—"come in the third floor. I'm four doors from the rear, to the right from the fire-escape. Two eighteen."

"I'll remember," she said. "And now we better pick up my suits and get back and check in to Louie."

"Yeah," I said. "Or I'm going to look awfully funny with my throat slit."

VIII



DARK had come when I hit my room, swearing. I was in about eight fathoms too deep. That's forty-eight feet of cold, black, murky water you can't breathe in! There was such a thing as getting information, and there

was a way to do it—but who in the hell wanted to drown getting it!

I felt lousy and light-headed. Hell! It was that bright red dress and the body inside it! Something I shouldn't want from a poor sick lonesome kid—afraid of the dark!

I looked up.

She stood there, framed in the doorway.

She closed the door behind her and took off her mink coat and moved slowly toward me. Her lips sank into my neck, and then she was holding me, drowning, too.

I was gone.

I tried to think of Roberts and Thompson and my purpose. "The purpose is to get information!" I reminded myself. "Learn the identity of the voice! That's the purpose!" I kept repeating it and shifted my eyes from her neck.

I had to stop wondering how silky smooth

her breasts would feel without that red dress between us! I had to stop licking my lips sunk on hers! I had to stop seeing the hurricane of passion raging in those gray-green eyes. I had to keep my eyes off the perfect symmetry of her thighs, the way they protruded, the classic bone structure.

I had to get her out or have her!

There was no time to draw straws.

I had to have her or suffocate!

I almost suffocated anyway!

You can say all you want to about a Beethoven symphony. Love by a fireside. The exotic breathless quiet of a tropical night. The Isle of Capri. Stromboli. April in Paris. That night brought all of those things to that slovenly hotel room . . .

"Hello, Betty."

"Wade, darling! Is anything wrong? You sound so all down in the dumps. Are you ill?"

"I'm fine. Fine."

"Sleeping well? Eating well?"

"Sure, sure."

"Coming home?"

"Not for a few days."

Her voice dropped. "Oh." Then she brightened. "I must tell you about Florence, dear. She's been singing like crazy all day! It's really heartening to hear her, gives you a warm feeling all through. She seems so happy. Do you think I could let her out on the back lawn?"

"Why, I—"

"I was wondering, maybe it's the confinement that keeps her from learning to fly again. I'll watch her closely, dear, and let her practice."

"Yeah. Sure, sure."

"Darling, you must take care of yourself."

"Yeah. You do the same. Be seeing you."

With an uneasy feeling I hung up the phone in the little shoe repair shop. There was little sense in calling Roberts until the definite time of the heist was set. Then he could start the fireworks.

I went out to the Negro shine boy, blinked at the sunshine and hopped up on the bench. I watched the Western Transport truck pull into the alley; I watched the

dough being loaded and kept my eyes peeled for cops and any snoopers that might screw the works. Then I finished the shine and walked over to Fifth.

I PICKED up the suitcase at a little luggage shop on Collins Street. I got nine dollars and forty cents change and a sales ticket. I stuck them in my coat to give to Thompson. He was a hell of a hood when he worried about nine bucks and forty cents!

Then I was seated before Thompson, reporting that everything went smooth at the bank—no cops, no interference that I could see. He said that it would be only a short time before the deal would be set. I nodded, breathing in the staleness of the room, and her perfume.

She wasn't there, and I was glad of that. I was afraid she'd come in and look at me in that hard, bitter way again. But then I knew that we both realized that last night couldn't be repeated. To go on meant hanging onto a straw in mid-ocean.

I didn't want to see her again, and I was pretty sure that she felt the same way. It had been one of those impromptu crazy things where somehow the fuse got lighted and there was damn little you could do about it, except let it explode. What an explosion!

I got back to my hotel room and dug out the rye and put a nipple on it. I wondered if she'd been in one of the bedrooms crying while I'd checked in with Thompson. I began to get scared. I imagined a hundred things that might have happened to her.

I tried not to think. I picked up the morning paper and sat on the bed trying to read. When that didn't work, I went down and got some magazines and brought them back up. I read them all, but it didn't stop me from thinking about her. Hell, the smart thing for me to do was to go down to the restaurant next door and eat and forget it.

I did, then went back up to my room, afraid she wouldn't be there. And she wasn't. By six o'clock I was pacing the rug, all twisted up inside, screwy, fit to be tied. I was afraid I'd never see her again! I wanted to hold her all over; I kept wondering what she was doing. I didn't think there was a chance in hell of her coming back, but I

showered and shaved and put on all my clean clothes.

I'd started to tie my tie when she came in.

She wore a light blue dress and gold sandals. Her hair was tied back from her face, and there was a soft light in her eyes—a new shyness. The hard war paint had vanished. She wore just a soft touch of makeup. She was more beautiful than any woman I'd ever seen.

I just stood there, feeling weaker, and holding her. Then we were both giggling like a couple of school kids—until her lips came close to my ear.

"Jim—Jim—"

I kissed her.

"I think I love you," she said.

My heart knocked loud.

She snuggled closer. The perfume she was wearing was like a Garden of Paradise.

"I haven't been able to think of anything but you all day," she whispered. "I felt like dancing on a cloud, or something." She held me closer. "I think last night I died and went to heaven."

"Me, too," I said hoarsely. "But how in the hell did Thompson get up there?"

"You worried about him?"

"I'll break his fat back."

"You're wonderful," she said.

"You're pretty wonderful yourself."

"Do you love me?" she whispered.

"If I don't I got a fever of a hundred and five."

"How do you feel about me?"

"Something I haven't felt in years."

"Can you explain it?"

"No. Except that you get me all flustered. See? I can't even tie my tie."

"There's no need of it now," she said. She took off my shirt and kissed my shoulders. "You're so lovely."

HER dress slipped off easy-like. All I had to do was slide down the zipper. All it left was a little blue puddle in the middle of the floor.

She held me tight. "Darling," she said, "I'm so afraid."

"Of what, Madge?"

"Tomorrow—and the day after—and Louie."

"Don't be scared, Madge. Louie doesn't scare me." I laughed and picked her up in my arms. I tossed her on the bed and climbed in beside her. "We might as well go to hell together . . ."

I wish I could say it stopped there. That the second night blew out the fuse. But it was only the beginning. I spent my mornings nosing around the shoeshine shop, my nights with her. In those four days I got to waiting for the sound of her footsteps coming up the fire-escape, or pacing the rug,

PRISON PILFERERS



MOST people are of the opinion that burglars want to stay away from jail. That isn't always the case, however, as proved recently in Clinton, Indiana, where a couple of extremely nervy thieves broke into the local lock-up and robbed it. They came away with exactly what they wanted—thirty quarts of whisky and two slot machines which had been recently confiscated from a local tavern.

That isn't a lone instance of prison pilfering either, as evidenced by the Jacksonville, Florida, authorities. They reported, not so very long ago, the pillaging of their Chief of Police's quarters. Three pistols, a gold badge, two sets of handcuffs and \$170 in cash were among the things that were declared missing.

—Mark Knight

unable to wait to grab her in my arms.

Then there was the night she sat, naked, on the edge of the bed, talking quietly.

"I did sing once at the Roxy," she was saying. "Amateur night." She smiled. "I never was a singer, though I always wanted to take lessons when I was a kid. I used to dream of singing in a big important place like the Met. I'd see the beautiful red velvet curtain ringing down and usher carrying big bouquets of flowers up the aisle—to me. I was crazy about the music conductor. He looked like Johnny Weismuller—only

he couldn't swim. I'd smile down at him while I sang, and he was madly in love with me, I suppose. Everybody was."

She laughed. "Bet you think I'm crazy, pretending things like that." She smiled wanly. "I don't dream about stuff like that any more. Don used to say it's a waste of time to day-dream." She looked at me. "Don is the guy I told you about that was killed. Don used to say, 'There sure as hell ain't no Santa Claus! You got to make it the hard way.'" She sighed. "Don used to say things like that."

"Too bad you ever got mixed up with him."

She nodded. "The easiest way is more often the hardest. I guess I liked the bright lights, furs and diamonds, things that only money can buy."

"Yeah," I said. "But Freud would say it all happened in your childhood. The other little girls had fur mittens, while your little fingers froze blue."

She wet her lips. "I can't complain about my childhood. I wasn't chained in an attic, or beaten. I starved a little, that's all."

"That's all, eh?"

She nodded. "Lunchtime in high school is one of those sour things I remember. Sometimes there wasn't even bread in the house to take for lunch. The old man had a bad habit; he was a fanatic on religion. About everything he made went to the church." She smiled. "I had a time trying to hide our poverty from my friends. At lunchtime I simply said I wasn't hungry. But then I couldn't stand to watch them eat, so I'd go off somewhere alone, to the library mostly, and pretend I was looking up something, or read. I began to hate books and learning." Her eyes shone. "And yet something told me that without an education I'd never get away from being poor." She paused. "At that age a body can take such punishment."

SHE leaned over and inhaled from my cigarette. She blew out a long thin stream of smoke, then continued:

"I wanted to finish high school. I thought a diploma meant something, and I guess it does. I wanted desperately to go on to

college. But I couldn't. At thirteen I got a job at the neighborhood theatre, as an usherette. I worked until ten-thirty or eleven each night, and slept through study periods and bluffed my way through." She smiled again softly. "I used to stand at the curtain in the movie house while the glamour of the picture ground on. I'd look at the wonderful clothes and sophistication of the movie stars and feel like dying. Because in my heart I knew I'd never be anything higher than Madge Morton from Poverty Row."

She looked at me. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I've never told anyone."

"Maybe I have a sympathetic face."

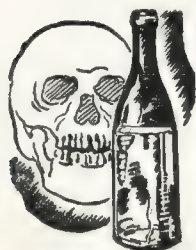
"But, too," she went on, "there were nice things about my childhood. I remember once my father took me to the High Sierras. I had to hold onto his hand when I saw how tall and majestic the trees were. I never forgot it—how clean the air smelled, with the clouds soft and white and fluffy and so close to me. I've often thought how nice it would be to live there—with the man I love. It was like—like all the poems that Blanding has ever written."

She took a breath, "He's wonderful, isn't he? You get such a clean feeling from all his poetry." She sighed. "I'd give anything if I could think the way he does. Just write poetry and travel." She paused. "But I suppose there's more to it than that."

I studied her and thought of something. Something that was suddenly tearing at my insides. "Madge," I said, "if this job doesn't make the grade it's going to go badly with you. You're an accomplice to the fact. That means you'll go up the same as any of us."

"I know," she said simply, "but if you don't make out, I—I don't want to either."

IX



ON MY feet I was smoking nervously, and pacing the rug again.

"I'll make out all right!" I assured Madge with more certainty than I felt. "But you've got to get out of it. I'll make out!"

"That's what Don said the night he was

killed." She looked up slowly, with fear in her eyes. "You can say all you want to about honesty being for the suckers, but you live longer taking the long straight road."

I crushed out my cigarette. "That's why you've got to clear out before the job is on."

She shook her head.

I looked at her. I wanted to kneel before her and cry and tell her that I was betraying her. "I love you, Madge," I said. "You're so beautiful, so lovely."

"Why, darling!" she said in surprise. "That's music!" She rushed into my arms and buried her face in my chest. "I'm so sick of being hard and ugly, hiding under a shell of brittle dialogue. Jim, I—I feel cleansed. With you, everything is so different. It's us, darling! It's just got to be!"

I held her.

"There for so very long I was lost," she said. "I never thought anything good would ever happen. And then you came along, just when I was choking to death." She looked up; there were tears in her eyes. "Darling, let's both go away."

I felt cold. "Where to?"

"Anywhere. We'll hide out. Louie will never find us." Her eyes shone brightly. "Don stayed, don't you see?"

My voice dropped. "I've got a job to finish."

She shook her head. "Not any more. We're getting out. To hell with money. I know a place in the Sierras. Nobody'd ever find us. It's beautiful there, and there's peace, Jim." Her eyes shone. "Peace!" She held me closer. "I don't care what you've been, just as my past means nothing to you! Because we've both been so lost!"

She was crying softly. "I love you so! We'll have more than money. Money means so little! We'll both get jobs. I have six hundred dollars in cash and we can start on that. Oh, darling, I've spent my life in the shadows, always aching to walk in the sun!"

"I—" I felt choked.

"I want us to be respectable citizens. A little house. I want to make curtains, and cook for you, and sew buttons on your shirts. I want a dog and a cat, neighbors yelling good morning across the fence; nothing to fear, peace in our hearts!" She was crying

harder. "We've both been so wrong. So *wrong*! This is our chance! Now! Before it's too late! Go some place! Send for me! It'll be just the two of us. My God, don't you see it, Jim? A great blinding wonderful light is shining for us!"

"Madge—" There was nothing but misery all through me.

"You love me," she sobbed. "You just said that you love me. Then save my life—and yours! Please, darling! If you don't, I'm dead, I know. The forest is ugly and black and we'll never get through it!"

Her voice rushed on: "We're comparative strangers, I know. Adam and Eve took a chance and built a world. Darling, we love each other. That's all we need." Her eyes grew brighter, her voice more desperate. "Jim, listen! Open your heart. I'm pleading for my life and yours. Don't go through with it! Come away with me. I'll take your hand and lead you. Maybe the blind leading the blind, but I've been over the path before!"

I kept looking at her. Blood was pounding in my temples. "I—I'll have to think about it, Madge."

"Thank you, darling." She smiled radiantly. "Now I can hope. Tomorrow you'll see it my way, I know. A feeling inside me. Just know that I'm right. Tomorrow it will be clear before you, all doubt gone."

She stood before me, a shining white goddess.

"It's us, darling," she said. "*Us, us!* The rest never happened! We were born today!"

NO USE kidding myself after that. The water had looked fine, but some damned undertow had dragged me halfway across the Pacific! No use saying I wasn't in love with Madge. I had no other ambition than to hold her in my arms and protect her. I wondered how she'd look at me when Roberts closed in and she knew that I was the hangman. It about drove me nuts!

There was only one thing to do and that was to get her out. Betty? I didn't think about her. Betty was just a face and a dim voice. Betty was a million years ago.

I didn't sleep much that night. My head was too full of a jumble of torturing

thoughts. The next day was cold and gloomy, with a tight vacuum in the air. I went downstairs and drank a cup of coffee. I bought a bottle of rye and took it back up. I guess it was about noon when she came in.

She tried to act confident; she tried to smile, but when she saw my eyes she knew—and you could tell that she was scared inside. She spoke lightly.

"I'm all packed. We—we can leave today."

I poured half a tumbler of rye and drank it. "I'm not running out."

"Oh?" There was panic in her eyes. "Sure, you'll beat the cops for maybe another year. If you're lucky. But look at you. Look how crazy you are today, your eyes all wild, nerves jittery, unshaved, drinking too much—all because of this job." Her voice trembled. "That's how you'll spend the rest of your life. Afraid. Afraid of a tap on the shoulder. Afraid of somebody recognizing you. Some day you might want to know decent people, and you won't be able to tell them about your past."

"Shut up!" I said. "Shut off the record! I've heard enough of that fancy preaching." There was a desperate excitement all through me. "It's *you* you should be worrying about! What if I suddenly do see the light and turn the whole bunch of you over to the cops!"

"You?" Her eyes darkened. "I'm not worried."

I whirled to her. "Then you better damn well start getting worried! You've got one of two chances. Get out now—if you don't you'll have to turn State's Evidence."

Her lips tightened. "I'd burn first!"

I grabbed a cigarette and lighted it. "Then you'll probably burn, baby. 'Cause I don't like the feel of things. I don't trust the brains, either." I looked at her. "Who the hell is he?"

"Neil Flint," she said. "Owns the stock brokerage on Seventh, as a front."

"Get out of town, baby," I said. "You're all packed, you say. Scram until this deal's over."

Her eyes softened. "We can go together."

"Huh-uh." I was pacing the rug again. "I like the feel of dough." My breath was coming faster. "No dame's going to preach

me out of it." I tried to laugh. "Where would we wind up, broke? The whole damn setup stinks! So we leave now and go to the Sierras?" My head throbbed. I rubbed my temples. "The Sierras, eh? A couple of damn refugees on the county? Or do we pan for gold?"

She stared, lips paling. I sank down on the bed. My head was throbbing so violently I couldn't think straight.

"Might as well know, baby, I got no dough, or we'd hit the Sierras all right!" My voice was strange to me. "The important thing is this haul—it may hit the rocks. I don't want you involved. I'm telling you, Madge—like a father, I'm telling you—get out!"

Her mouth quivered. "You don't love me enough, that's it."

"I do love you, Madge. My God, if I didn't love you, I—" My voice choked. "Listen carefully, baby. Write to me in care of the Netherlands Hotel here. I know the desk clerk. He'll send a letter to me wherever I am. Please, baby, for *me* you've got to go. I don't want you in this! I want us to see each other again!"

SHE KEPT staring. "You don't make sense. Why aren't you afraid for yourself? If the haul comes off we'll both be all right."

"Madge, will you go—for me?"

"All right," she said. A sob escaped her throat. "You're just like Don and all the rest! You poor, blind fool! You'll never get out; you're too weak!"

She slammed the door behind her.

She didn't come back that night.

Next morning I got the word before I was out of bed—a phone call from Thompson:

"Get over here!"

There was urgency in his voice. I knew that the deal was about to be closed.

I dressed hurriedly, left the hotel without shaving, and started the two-block walk to the White Lion. The city was bathed in sunshine; I could feel its warmth on my back and shoulders, but inside I was icy cold and all knotted up.

I went in the back door of the café, up

the stairs, and into Thompson's office.

Fieldman and Monroe were there. Thompson sat behind his desk, with his shirt collar open at the neck and his sleeves rolled up a couple of turns. The room was hot and smelled of his cigar. There was a bottle of brandy by his elbow.

"We'll wait for Tex," he said. His face was gleaming with little beads of moisture.

Nobody said anything. We sat there, waiting. I could hear the soft purr of the electric clock on the far side of the room, the faraway hum of traffic from Sixth Street, and a fly buzzing aimlessly across the room. It landed on Thompson's head. He brushed at it, poured himself a shot of brandy, looked at us, and motioned to the bottle.

"Have one." His voice was hollow.

Fieldman got up, poured three drinks, and handed them to us. The clock ticked off fourteen minutes before Tex came in. He looked at Thompson and grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry I'm late. The damned cab driver had to pick himself up a ticket for speeding and then argue with the slob that gave it to him. I never saw so many spies riding motors. I—"

"Shut up," Louie said, "and sit down."

He rubbed a hand across his face. When he spoke again I knew how scared he was. He looked and sounded like a bull-frog.

"We're going to have a last get-together, go over the whole thing." He paused to swat at the fly. "You all know what you're to do. We'll go over it, the timing, and the things you can expect." He poured himself another drink, and wiped his face with his hand. "I've decided on the Chrysler sedan." He turned to Fieldman. "See that it's serviced. I've got a set of Ohio plates, registered to a Chevy in Cleveland, off a school-teacher's car. Put 'em on for cover."

He got up and waddled over to the corner closet, his shirt-tail hanging out, his suspenders dragging behind him. He pulled out a Browning automatic and threw it to Monroe.

"Be sure it's loaded," he sneered. "It's short enough that you can do a lot of damage with it. I had ten inches taken off the barrel."

He wasn't kidding when he said he'd had the barrel shortened. From the right dis-

tance it would put out a pattern of shot as big as a bushel basket!

"Look it over," he barked at Monroe. "Get the feel of it. Be sure you know how it works. There's a box of shells in the closet." He turned to me. "Cox," he said, "you got your belly gun. If the going's rough, you can use it." He spoke to Tex. "You got your forty-five. That's all you'll need."

FIELDMAN drank his brandy, then lighted the cigarette he'd been holding. "Where does Al fit in?"

Thompson blew and wheezed and rubbed his hand down over his face. "I'm not using him. He's good as gold, but he scares easy on something big as this. But we'll still have to cut him in."

He poured himself another drink, then wiped his mouth with his hand.

"I want you guys not to leave home base. You'll get the call, you'll come here." His eyes turned to a big cardboard box by the couch. "I got G.I. coveralls from War Surplus; you'll all wear 'em over your uniforms." He gestured to the closet. "Uniforms are here."

He gasped for breath. "Everything's ready." His eyes hardened. "Remember on the ride to the motel you're to slip on the coveralls again. Won't be time to get off the Brownie outfits on the way to the motel. Fieldman will bring you. It's outside a little burg I picked out. We'll meet there, split the dough, and you guys blow. I got to stay because I'm legitimate. Fieldman will stay because he's manager of the club. We can't have anybody missing us. You guys go your way—Chicago's a good cooling-off

town. But get in touch with me in a couple weeks." He grinned. "Might have something else in the fire."

He walked back to his desk and flopped in the big leather chair. I could hear the soft hiss of air ooze out of the cushion.

"Now you guys beat it. But stick close to home, like I said. I want to be able to get you. Right now it's a question of hours." He blinked. "That's all there is to it."

Nobody said anything. We just sat and finished our brandy and looked at each other. All of us were nervous and scared.

I don't think any one of the others was more scared than I.

I went back to my hotel room and waited, with a hunch that the fireworks was scheduled for tomorrow morning.

X



BY midnight Thompson still hadn't called.

I wondered if he'd pull a last-minute fastie—call us in at nine in the morning, to go in on the heist. I broke out in a sweat wondering if I should call Roberts. But then, I reasoned, even if Louie did pull a last-minute call, there'd still be time for me to hit a phone booth on my walk to his office. Al was off my tail now, and Louie trusted me—at least it's what Madge had said.

I wondered if she'd flown the coop. Well, damn it, I'd warned her. There was no time now to think of a dame. There was a job

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

SENSATIONAL NEW **TING**
CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED
PEELING TOES -
AIDS HEALING
AMAZINGLY!



FIRST
USED
IN HOSPITALS
NOW
RELEASED TO
DRUGGISTS
GUARANTEED

TING MUST
SATISFY YOU IN
A WEEK - OR
MONEY BACK!



EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS
HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING
TING CREAM TODAY!
GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS

Ting CREAM
PROVED EFFECTIVE
IN KILLING SPECIFIC
TYPES OF
ATHLETE'S FOOT
FUNGUS ON
60 SECOND
CONTACT!

ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE

to be done. I told myself that over and over, but it didn't work.

That night I slept a fitful sleep, full of strange dreams. I remember the phone rang, and it was light outside. I couldn't believe it was morning. I looked at my watch. Six. I grabbed up the receiver.

"Cox?" It was Thompson.

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow morning. Thursday." There was no emotion in his voice. "Be here at eight-thirty. I mean eight-thirty!"

"Okay," I said, and broke out in a cold sweat.

Somehow I got my clothes on. I had my hand on the doorknob when the phone rang again.

It was Madge. Her voice was pitched high.

"I just want you to know, Jim, that I'm staying. No matter what. I'm not running out, either."

"Madge, listen—"

The phone was dead.

I slammed it down and went out the door.

I hurried downstairs, out onto Sixth Street, and found the little corner drug store. I looked at the phone booth, then turned and walked slowly outside again.

I must've gone around that block three times and drunk fifteen cups of coffee. I remember seeing the same faces, the same stores, over and over.

Afraid of the dark, was she, eh? She didn't know what darkness was—yet. Not until she spent her nights alone in a prison cell. She'd be rounded up with the rest. She'd be booked, tried, and the least she'd get by with was five years.

Madge—in the Joint. For something she'd wanted to get me out of! I could see her being checked in. She'd look sexy, all right, in her prison uniform. With those busts and legs she had the girls up there'd be crazy about her! Madge—pushing a broom in Tehachapi, working in the laundry—

No way she could find out that I'd been the contact. No use worrying about that. Hell, I could visit her, couldn't I? See her about once a week and—

No, no, I could only write to her. As Jim Cox, she'd have to think I was doing

time, too. That could be the only way—just some damn silly, trite word of cheer on paper. Or else—else give it to her straight. Tell her I was a dick, had seen my duty and done it. It was that corny! It would go over big with Madge. I could see her eyes when I told her.

What was it I'd heard about that place? Somebody'd said something only last week about the food. Chicken every Sunday, tainted and greasy, lumpy yellow mashed potatoes, those rocky crinkly peas— She helped feed Europe's starving kids, eh? Well, she wouldn't be going for that, either, after her time in stir.

EVERYBODY in the world should be a cop, I thought wildly! Everybody should know the elation of turning some poor weak bastard over to the law! Or a dame—a dame that somehow had crawled into your blood stream, a dame that was afraid of the dark.

But then sometimes a stretch did some good. Why not use cold common sense? Maybe when she got out she'd lay off guys like Don, and Thompson, and Jim Cox, and find her place in the sun. Sometimes it took a jolt. Hell, if I went around trying to rescue every woman in distress I could make a career of it.

I thought of how tender she was, how unselfish, how she'd said over and over how she loved me. "I want a little house," she'd said. "I want to cook for you and sew buttons on your shirt, and—" The plans she'd wanted, for us. "I've got six hundred dollars, Jim," she'd said. "We can start on that." She'd said, "There for so long I was so lost and then you came along, just when I was choking to death . . ." She'd said, "Darling, save my life and yours!"

Funny how a guy can't forget things—about a girl. Words kept echoing in my brain, spreading, multiplying.

And then I was back at the cigar store, knowing that this was the real lighting of the fuse, for the final disintegration.

I went inside, to the booth, picked up the phone, and dialed. Emotion had drained me. There was only a feeling of numbness.

"Roberts?" I said.

He hesitated. "Do you know it's six-thirty in the morning?"

"Yeah."

"Got the dope?"

"Set for tomorrow morning," I said. "The Southwest Bank at Fifth and Howser. Time—nine forty-five."

I talked on, giving him the setup on the big boss, telling him details, how we'd be dressed in bank guard outfits, the artillery that would be carried, the time of entrance, how each of us would make our approach in the alley, the plan to take the truck to the Bank of America three blocks away, and then the motel.

"They wouldn't give the name of the motel," I said. "And I didn't want to be too curious."

"No need of that," he said. "We'll get those babies before they make the truck."

"I'm the kid that'll enter from the Arcade," I went in. "So tell the guys to watch for me. I don't want to be killed for my efforts."

"It's good work, Wade!" his voice boomed. "Anything else I should know?"

"Not a damn thing!"

"You sore at somebody?"

"Hell, no," I told him. "I don't even feel any more."

He laughed. "We'll book you with the rest, then release you at the station."

"Thanks," I said drily. "That's damn nice of you."

He laughed again, and I banged up the receiver.

I hurried out of the drug store and began to walk.

I **CROSSED** streets, passed people, shops. I didn't give a damn where I was going. I just had to walk. I felt all loused up, twisted, and dreamy. Thoughts kept spinning. I thought of the High Sierras, poetry by Blanding, Canadian Club whisky, girls I'd known once and would never know again, a fixed prizefight I'd seen that didn't stay fixed, and the way the blood ran down the face of the loser and onto the ropes, and the way his jaw set as they carried him out—because he was dead. He'd been dead before he fell down, but the crowd didn't know

until the next day when they read about it.

I thought of these things, abstractedly, half-remembered moments, and all the aching, the dreary monotony in being a cop. I thought of all the poverty in the world, and a million bucks split seven ways!

I don't know what happened in that half-hour.

Sometimes I think I believed that I *was* Jim Cox!

I remember how my head ached while I talked to Betty from a little cigar store telephone booth.

"You see," I heard her saying, her voice far-away, "I let her out of the cage, so that she'd have space in the back lawn to practice. I went out and—"

"Betty," I interrupted, "I might be away for some time!" There was a ringing in my ears. "For some time, Betty."

"Oh? I'm sorry. You'll write?"

"Yeah."

"Another one of those long-drawn-out assignments?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"Wade, what I was trying to tell you was when I went out to get Florence she—she was dead, dear. I think it was the excitement of—" She broke off. "I know you're in a hurry, but *why* must you go out of town?"

"I—"

"I know you can't tell me," she added quickly. "This police work is so lousy. You never know what to expect. It—it won't be dangerous, will it?"

I hesitated, then said, "Yes, Betty. This time it *is* dangerous." My tongue felt swollen. "If I don't come back you—"

"Now, Wade, don't talk like that."

"Got to go, honey."

"Darling, I—you—"

I hung up.

It was just 7:15 when I walked into Thompson's office. He looked just like he had yesterday—the same shirt, the same suspenders, the same brandy. Fieldman was there. Thompson looked at me, his pig eyes glistening. He poured a drink, shoved it across the desk to me.

"What's on your mind?" It was a hoarse croak.

I lighted a cigarette with shaking fingers; my eyes felt sunken in their sockets. I looked up at him, at the brandy, at Fieldman, and began to talk rapidly and nervously.

"Just this. I've been doing some thinking. I—I've got a feeling. Call it a hunch, intuition, fear, or common sense, I— This job won't last till tomorrow."

I heard Thompson breathing. My voice shot up.

"It's the same feeling I had on the jewel job with Les. I talked him into pulling it a day early, just because of a hunch I had. If we'd waited a day longer we wouldn't have made it. The jewelry was supposed to go out that night." I inhaled on my cigarette. "Let's do it now."

"Nuts," Thompson said.

I felt my jaws grinding. "Why let us guys stew until tomorrow? We're all jumping like a bunch of creeps the way it is!"

LOUIE THOMPSON kept looking at me. Again I could hear his breath whistle out. Fieldman looked at me, scratched his chin and cleared his throat. He looked at Thompson.

"Maybe the kid's got something, Louie."

"Yeah?" Thompson looked like he'd swallowed something bitter.

"Yeah," Fieldman told him. "The kid's got good hunches. He never hit the bucket for anything. I think he's right. I think today's the day. Let's get the thing over with!"

Thompson sat there, staring into space, making tents out of his hands. Then he picked up the phone.

He dialed, asked for Room 200, and spoke sharply into the phone.

"Monroe? Louie. Get your ass over here. It's going this morning!" He held the receiver down for a moment then dialed again. "Tex? Louie. Get here. It's going today!"

He put the phone down and made a grab for the brandy. Water was running off his face in little rivers.

We must have sat there five minutes, waiting, when I started to smell her. How long she'd been in the room I don't know. When I turned around she was standing

just inside the bedroom door. Her voice came from a well.

"You think today's the day, Louie?"

Thompson took one look at her, stood up, and began beating his fists on the desk, wheezing and blowing. "Shut up!" he said. "You fight me off all night, and now give me a lot of cheap conversation." His nerves were jumping. "I can hear that any time. Shut up or get out!"

She turned and went back into the bedroom.

I got up and, with the excuse of finding the bath, left the room.

I found her in the second bedroom. I grabbed her.

"Look, baby, it's us all right." My voice shook. "You still got that six hundred bucks you told me about?"

She nodded.

"And you know where the motel is where we'll meet?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I want you to buy us a car. It's eight o'clock now. You got two hours to get to the first car lot and pick us up anything that runs. Give a phony name."

She stared, expressionless.

I took a breath and went on, "Have it parked near the motel—and you inside it. As soon as the dough's split we'll take off!" I squeezed her. "We'll hit the Sierras all right, and we won't be damned mountain-combers!"

She didn't say anything.

"Is it a deal?" I panted.

"Yes, Jim." Her voice carried no emotion. "It's a deal."

I left her. I made tracks back out to Thompson.

It was a two-minute wait before Monroe came in, with Tex following two seconds later.

"Hell, I'm glad," Tex said, unloosening his tie. "I was getting nervous prostration."

"Me, too," Monroe said. With restless weariness he began unbuttoning his shirt. "Let's get this damn thing over with. I see by the weather reports it'll be raining tomorrow, and you know how traffic gets tied up with the streets wet." He pointed to the uniforms lying on the couch. "You guys get

into those." We followed his orders.

Tex was stepping out of his trousers. I took off my suit and calmly hung it over a chair. I pulled on the blue-gray uniform pants and the shirt. They were the usual door-shaker's uniforms; the caps were the same shade of teal gray, with cap pieces already mounted.

Somewhere Thompson had picked up some private patrol badges. Sam Browne belts lay in a pile on Thompson's desk; they were the usual black woven leather. I got mine on, buckled the shoulder strap, and wondered how Tex was going to carry his .45 in a cross-draw holster built for a .38. I buttoned my shirt, stuck my gun in the belt holster.

I glanced at Tex and Monroe, already in their uniforms.

They looked just like they were supposed to—a couple of guards going to work. Tex threw me a pair of the G.I. coveralls, and then I was pulling on khaki, over my uniform.

XI



FIELDMAN got into his coveralls, then stood up and looked at his watch. He checked it with the electric clock on the wall. "We'd better get set," he said quietly.

Monroe took the sawed-off shotgun out of the closet, loaded it, and charged it. He set the safety, then swung it up to his shoulder, looked down the barrel, and moved it in circles as if he were tracking an imaginary duck.

Fieldman pulled out the suitcases.

Thompson still sat at his desk, his face sickly, perspiration running down his jowls. "All stroll in and take your stations. I want none of you going lop-eared." He picked up the phone and dialed.

There was a short wait, then he said:

"This is Louie. Tell the boss that escrow is closing today instead of tomorrow. That's all." He hung up and made a grab for the brandy bottle.

We sat facing him, while he went over the plan for the last time.

At nine-thirty, we went out the back door, down the back stairs, Fieldman leading, Tex following, Monroe and myself bringing up the rear. I walked stiffly, loose-legged, the two big suitcases bumping my legs.

We'd reached the alley before I became alive enough to realize that my face was wet, and the sky was heavily overcast; the morning air was too cold, the air too soft, too still.

My legs carried me inside the garage. I climbed in the back seat of the Chrysler, with Monroe. Tex sat in the front with Fieldman.

Fieldman backed out. My throat felt dry. I needed another drink. The uniform was too tight around my stomach, the coveralls too hot.

I kept my eyes on my watch. It took us twelve minutes to reach the Coolidge Building.

We sat there, waiting. I noticed with a start that a fine rain was misting the windshield. Now was the time. It was no longer a million-dollar dream! In a few minutes there was much to be done!

Rain fell on the steel roof of the car.

"Hell!" Monroe blurted. He sat restlessly, sweat on his cheeks. Fieldman was pale, but calm, his eyes fixed to his watch. Tex turned around in the seat and gave me a frightened grin. "You can die only once," he said, his voice cracking. He sat there giggling softly.

I began to peel off the coveralls.

We waited. It was the horrifying wait of condemned men, men who sat in the death house with mute, hopeful faces. I held my cigarette at my side, afraid to reveal the shaking of my hands.

Rain pelted the windshield. Thunder rumbled overhead, then crashed, the sound aching in my eardrums. Pedestrians moved past, stunned by the sudden deluge. I shivered. Monroe began to swear—a volume of obscenities.

We kept waiting.

At last Fieldman gave me the signal.

I climbed out, over the suitcases, feeling that it was the long walk into darkness, the

end of the world! Maybe it was.

It was my idea of nothing—a madman's dream!

I was walking again through the Arcade. My first thought was that I couldn't be sick, but my stomach began to retch. I moved on, wondering how anything that had once seemed so easy could be so hard to do.

I KEPT walking. I had no control over my legs. I passed the liquor store, the dress shop. A little barber, in white apron, who was standing out in front of his shop kept looking at me. I felt wired together. The top button of the uniform trousers snapped at my waist. I jumped. Then my pulse was too quiet, my breath quick and shallow. I wondered if my heart had stopped beating.

I walked on, passing distorted images of people. I was too tired, all energy sapped. Ahead, I saw the glass doors. The shock of realization hit me. In a few seconds I'd be through the Arcade! My heart began to beat fiercely. Fear swelled inside me, knotting in my lungs. I tried to breathe, conscious of my teeth being clenched. I loosened my jaw, and kept walking.

I reached the glass doors. Beyond, rain fell in rivulets. I saw the two bank guards pushing the empty conveyor back to the bank door. I was seconds too soon!

A little Mexican guy was entering the Arcade, his hair and clothes limp, water-soaked. He was holding the door open for me to pass first!

I hesitated, my eyes fixed on his, knowing that I must keep moving. I turned around, sauntered back. I counted to five, then retraced my steps to the glass doors.

The two guards were entering the bank. The steel door closed. To my right, Tex was closing in, whistling. His uniform was wet, shining and black. Water ran down the visor of his cap. His face was quiet, unset, easy-going—no different than if he were doing an honest day's work.

The outside guard was leaning against the bank building under the small canopy, out of the rain, holding his shotgun by its stock. He was a small, stoop-shouldered man with patches of fiery red hair under his cap. At the moment, he was our worry—and he

could be a damn big one!

Beyond him, Monroe had made it across the street, threading his way through pedestrians. I watched as he stopped, glanced up at the rain, and lighted a cigarette. The only thing that had changed in Monroe was his right eye. It was bulging more than usual.

He came closer. I could see the panic in his face, lips working, as if he were talking to himself, the thin cruel lines around his mouth that hadn't been there before.

He was moving faster, walking directly up to the guard.

I'd stopped thinking which was why I could stand it. I could feel hope building up in me, a silent, fervent prayer that it would be fast—and then get the hell out! I could see vague flickers of all the guys I had pitched in the bucket. I saw my mother's face.

Pedestrians kept moving past on Fourth Street, hurrying through the downpour, bumping into each other. Each time one of them glanced our way my heart stopped. I heard the whir of traffic on the wet streets, the clanging of streetcars. In the distance a newsie was screeching his dead headlines. Within an hour now he'd have the extras, whether we made it or not!

I turned the knob of the glass door, and stepped out into the alley. My arm didn't belong to me. In another second I'd made four feet, stumbling toward the truck, rain pelting my face.

Monroe was walking directly to the red-headed guard. I heard his voice from far-away:

"Hi, Jo. You're going to get wet." He was grinning cheerfully!

I saw apprehension flicker over the face of the guard. Monroe mumbled something else while Tex, holding his gun flat in his hand, moved up beside them.

PEDESTRIANS hurried past for Fourth Street.

Monroe reached out and lifted the shotgun out of the guard's arms. The guard stood for a second staring, his mouth dropping open, the cigarette falling into the wet alleyway. He glanced at Tex, his face turning from a healthy pink to gray-green, his freck-

les making black spots against his skin. Monroe was smiling, saying something else. The red-headed guard turned around slowly, and faced the bank building.

I staggered to the back of the truck, my eyes on the bank door. It was like stage fright; my legs had turned to rubber; there was cotton in my mouth. Waves of nausea hit the pit of my stomach. Someone had clamped a steel band around my chest.

I climbed up into the back of the truck.

I looked back to see one of the bank guards who'd entered the back door of the bank. I thought I'd gone out of my mind.

He'd come around the corner, around Fourth Street! He ran past the red-headed guard, over to the open doors of the truck. He'd turned to the guard and started to yell, "The doors!" when Monroe shoved the .45 in his back and moved him up in the truck beside me.

Tex slammed the doors shut.

In another instant he was in the driver's seat. I heard the whir of the electric motor that pulled up the bank door!

The truck lurched forward as Tex raced the engine and jumped the clutch. I heard the dull hollow thud of Monroe's gun against the skull of the guard. He pitched forward on his face. Monroe pushed him over to one side of the bundles of cash.

Through one of the ports I could see the bank door go slowly up, the legs of the guards, the redhead jumping up and down, pushing buttons on the rear of the building, beating on the slowly moving door with clenched fists.

With breath gone, I started opening a suitcase and loading. The air was hot, close, inside the steel body. Sweat was pouring off Monroe's face. He was swearing, scared to death, muttering:

"This bastard *would* jam things up! Tex can't drive worth a damn! I should have killed this guy and left him in the alley!"

I went ahead loading the money. It was all in compact bundles, canvas bags with bull-black lettering:

Southwest Banking Corporation
U. S. Federal Currency

With the amounts of the dough on each sack.

Tex drove on. I glanced out the port, seeing the blur of traffic, rain slanting down, the grinding stop for traffic lights. I ducked my head and helped Monroe load the other suitcase.

The guard moved. Monroe looked at him and kicked him in back of the head. We kept loading the second suitcase.

So far we'd made it! I started to breathe. Everything good. I felt the truck lurch on a right turn.

The second suitcase got filled. There were two bundles left over. I automatically opened the front of my shirt and stuck them inside. Monroe was strapping up the suitcase. I was buttoning my shirt back up when I felt it.

A kick in the head!

Only it wasn't from a foot. I reeled; everything went gray. I fell to my knees and heard the savage snarl from Monroe's throat, felt him spring, heard a blur of voices.

My eyes opened. Through thin streaks of red I saw the two men groping wildly—the guard, sap in hand, wrestling desperately, and Monroe rolling on the floor of the truck.

WITHOUT thought, my hand reached down for my .38. It took strength to raise it and bring it down on the bastard's head.

There was silence.

Monroe blinked up at me, still on the floor, panting. He got to his knees. "This son-of-bitch came to—caught you with his sap!"

Blood began trickling down my face. I could feel the truck turn once more, then lurch to a stop.

Then Tex was out of the front seat, opening the back door, his eyes on the suitcases. The smile on his face was tight.

"Last stop for Wells Fargo Express! Let's go!"

Fieldman had pulled up behind us in the Chrysler. To our left was the Bank of America.

Tex and Monroe grabbed up the suitcases and walked leisurely to the door of the Chrysler. I staggered out behind them, following.

The car door was open. The suitcases went in. I dived in after them, with Tex

shoving me. Monroe was already in the right front seat.

Fieldman shifted gears, engine roaring, and swung away from the curb. Then the big Chrysler was sliding along through the heavy downpour.

We made the first light before anyone spoke.

"What happened to Cox?" Tex asked softly.

"We forgot little Stanley had a sap," Monroe answered in a flat voice.

Fieldman moved out into traffic, traveling easy. From somewhere in the distance the high-pitched scream of a siren echoed through the valleys of the city. Monroe looked back, white and sweaty. Then Tex was shouting:

"Relax! It's a fire wagon! They're on the next street!"

MONROE was pulling on the coveralls, throwing the other two suits into the back, yelling:

"Put 'em back on! And get that head of his to stop bleeding!"

I began to feel the pain in my head. It was sharp, and zigged down my spine. I rested back on the seat, blood dripping from my forehead. Tex mopped at my face with a handkerchief, and helped me on with the khaki.

Then Fieldman was cruising along like a Sunday driver. I tried to relax, but my muscles and nerves refused to settle down.

We pulled onto 101 Highway, and rolled along to the suburb. Fieldman was breaking down, pulling into the wet driveway of the Sphinx Motel.

I remember the rising and falling of my stomach as he turned around swiftly, then backed into a garage. He jumped out and closed the door.

Tex helped me out, carrying one of the suitcases. Monroe took the other and walked ahead, up a short flight of stairs. I stumbled against the side of the car, blood running down my face, making a red mist to see through, the warmth of it flowing inside my shirt collar, running down my neck. Suddenly I was walking in a rush, before collapse overtook me.

Monroe dragged me up the steps, and we were inside the motel room.

XII



EVERYTHING was a blur, confusion. Madge was there, Thompson, and Al. There was noise, a terrible ache in my head, and everybody talking at once.

Somehow I'd got on a bed. I was lying on my back trying to see. I heard

Madge's voice above the others, saying:

"I'm calling Doc!"

The door opened and closed.

Somebody threw me a towel. I tried to wipe the blood with it. Across the room, Tex, Monroe, Fieldman—all of them—were counting the dough, stacking it. I heard Thompson's voice, gleeful, smirking:

"Gentlemen, our horses have just come in! U.S. Federal currency! You can spend it anywhere!"

Then Tex bellowing: "Louie, Cox is getting blood all over the bed!"

Another towel hit me. I heard the door open and close. Then Madge was beside me. "Doc's on his way," her voice came over. I felt her move away, then felt her back once more, pressing a warm wet towel against my face.

"Jim—Jim!" she whispered softly. "You'll be all right, darling!"

I lay there, with my eyes closed, my head pounding, listening to the post mortem, Thompson's voice, screeching:

"A million dollars! We got it all!"

"All except what Cox has got in his shirt!" Monroe said hoarsely.

I could feel Thompson advancing toward me. I felt the buttons go when he grabbed the front of my shirt. He pulled out the red-stained sacks, his lips shaking like blubber.

"Tryin' to pull a quickie, eh?" he rasped.

I heard Tex's voice, hard. "Lay off, Louie. He couldn't get it all in the suitcases."

I opened my eyes to see Monroe looking out the window, screaming:

"Cops! The joint's lousy!"

There was a mad scramble. I sat up,

dazed. Tex was shouting:

"We been had! If they close in, we're dead!"

I saw the horror in Thompson's eyes. "It—it isn't possible!" he said in a fierce whisper. "How—" Blind fury seized him. "Get the stuff in the car! Let's try to get out!"

I saw Madge's face, deadlly pale as she broke out sobbing.

Then Captain Roberts' amplified voice was booming from outside, from over the portable P.A.:

"Come on out! All of you! The place is completely surrounded! If you don't we'll have to blast!"

I turned my eyes, unable to meet six terror-stricken faces.

There was the tinkle of glass as Thompson broke out the windowpane with his shot-gun, then an ear-splitting blast went off, leaving an acrid smell of gunpowder in the room.

Roberts picked it up from there.

"Want to play. Eh, Louie?"

Silence ensued. Silence followed by the chattering of the cops' Reising automatics, the sharp staccato bark of the .38s—little swarms of bees buzzing through the air.

I slid off the bed, and onto the floor. A wet wind seemed to blow through the room, shaking the windows. Everything had turned gray-yellow. I saw the low wooden door panels splinter, little chips of paint drop on the maroon rug beside me.

Monroe had picked up the suitcases and was heading toward the door that led down into the garage. There was another spray of gunfire, and he stopped still, one foot in the air. There was only a blank look on his face as he fell down the short flight of stairs.

AL WAS beside Thompson at the window, using a .45. He began to laugh—laughter beyond mirth.

I caught a glimpse of Madge. "Get in the bathroom!" I tried to yell. "Flat on your stomach."

She nodded, her eyes dead.

She did as I said and fell flat on the tile floor, out of firing range.

Tex was at the window, crouched, letting go with his .45. Thompson was on the op-

posite side, with the pump shot-gun, pumping and shooting, the ejected shells flipping back over his shoulder. Again there was the tinkling of broken glass, the dull thud of lead embedding itself in the walls, the smell of burnt powder, and blue smoke.

"The car's loaded! Let's go!" Fieldman was at the steps, screaming at the top of his lungs.

The heavy roar of the Chrysler's engine started in the close garage. Al, Thompson and Tex made a run for the steps. The doors opened and closed.

There was a splintering crash as Fieldman rammed the door. I could hear the shrieking of tires as he turned, the rising clatter of gunfire outside. Again the shrieking of tires. Then a crash—steel meeting steel.

Then silence.

I crawled over to the window and looked out.

The Chrysler was piled against another car. Dicks were swarming around in the rain, dragging out what was left of the passengers. Two of them pulled Louie out and put him on the lawn. He lay there. I saw Doc Sloan rushing across the lawn. He paused by Louie, then bent beside him, opening his satchel.

I got to my feet and moved back across the room—to Madge.

She was still on the bathroom floor.

Behind me, I heard the door opening, the little doc's voice.

"Let's have a look at you, Cox."

I kept staring at Madge. She lay on her back, her red hair haloed by a redder circle on the floor. Blood was seeping from her stomach, running down her dress. Blood was in her hair.

I kept croaking at the doc. Outside, there was the screaming of a police ambulance.

He stepped over me and went inside to Madge. He bent over her, lifted her eyelids, and ripped her dress at the stomach. Then he stood up and shook his head.

"Belly wound, that's bad," he said. "And one through the head."

"An ambulance," I said hoarsely. "Emergency!"

He shook his head again. "No use. She's

dying already." He picked up his satchel and walked to the door. "There's one out here in front," he said over his shoulder. "I'll tell the boys."

I found myself on my knees beside her.

She winced in pain, then opened her eyes and smiled. "I love you," she whispered.

"Madge—listen—" I was feverish. "There isn't much time and there's much to be said. I—I'm not Jim Cox at all. I'm a dick. Jim Cox is in the can. I—I took his place. A cop."

She stared, then closed her eyes.

"A cop," I said unsteadily. "An honest one until today. You've got to understand that it—was a job. A web to catch Louie. I—I began not liking it, then I knew you. I—I never was crooked before—until this morning. Until after I checked in with my captain, told him the set-up and— For a half-hour I was wrong, Madge, as wrong as any of the guys because I—I wanted the money—for us. I—"

HER BODY was shaking with regular tiny tremors.

I talked on. I didn't know what I was saying.

"Monroe's dead, here on the floor. Louie, out on the lawn, in the rain, dead, too, I think. They—they've rounded up the rest. Why the little doc is running loose, I don't know. Neil Flint will *wish* he was dead. How Roberts found us here, I don't know either. I—my name isn't Jim Cox, it—it's Wade Reed. I—I'm dead, too."

I don't know why I was talking about death, unless I was trying to tell her that she wasn't the only one that didn't get through the forest.

She moved restlessly, then whispered, "Darling, why don't you put a log on the fire? It—it's turned so—so cold."

I looked down at her, wondering if I'd heard right.

She wet her lips. "Are you disappointed? Please don't be." She shivered, then smiled. "In another month the snow will melt, and the sun will make things warm and lovely, and at night we can sit out on the porch and watch the fireflies light up the trees. The village is only half a mile away. Get our

coats. We'll walk there and I'll show you."

I stared, feeling my heart thump against my ribs.

"A bullet in her head," the little doc had said.

"Up here with you, Jim." Her voice had no resonance. "Everything that was ugly is gone. I—I'm not afraid any more."

Something kept gnawing inside me. "Not even of the—dark, Madge?"

Again she looked up at me, trying to focus her eyes. "I need a drink." She fought for breath. "My throat feels so—so—"

I got to my feet and found a glass. I filled it with water and kneeled beside her again. "Here." I lifted her up and put the trembling glass to her lips.

Her eyes were staring straight ahead now, glassy. "Darling, why did you turn off the light?"

She didn't drink the water, because she was suddenly limp in my arms.

Minutes passed. I was still holding her when the guys in white came in, their faces and coats wet with rain. I watched one of the internes bend over her, and probe her. Through the blur of the room I saw the little doc, then saw Madge being lifted onto a stretcher.

I got up and stood at the window.

There were footsteps, dim voices, the door closed, then opened. There were moments of silence, and then Captain Roberts' voice.

"Well, Wade, so they decided to pull it this morning instead of tomorrow."

"I—" Words wouldn't come.

His voice came to me queerly:

"There was no way you could let me know. So you had to go in with them. You had to do that, or it would have meant your life. I know how you figured—that even if the guys made it with the dough you could give me enough dope so that I could pick them all up."

There was another silence, then his voice ground on: "If it hadn't been for Doc Sloan the mob would have got away. Doc has been supplying me information for some time. He knew something was ready to explode, but he couldn't learn details from Thompson. He got the call from the dame that you were wounded. He figured that the job had come

off, so he telephoned me before he came here. I'd already received the call, that the bank had been knocked off. I—"

"I persuaded Louie to change his plans, to this morning," I said hollowly. "For a half-hour I went in there slugging—not as a cop, but as one of them. For a half-hour I was drunk with a million bucks—and a woman. I—"

THERE was a long silence. Then I heard him behind me, walking back and forth in the room.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," he said slowly. "But my ears are bad. So maybe

for a hero. The neighbors all came, and my mother was there. My mother had the little table by the window all decked out with candles, and a flag draped over my photo, in uniform, taken overseas beside a B-17, and my medals pinned on the flag.

She had a kid with her, too, another boy to be straightened out. And I gave him the old pitch about crime not paying. I wasn't feeling too good. Then my mother had the floor, with Doris and Clyde and the neighbors seated in a circle around her.

"The D.F.C.," my mother said proudly. "The Air Medal, the Bronze Star. Oh, yes, Wade was a hero in the war, too, as

**It was a respectable joint, but the blonde
that came with the beer had eyes
as hard as agates. . . .**

IN

HOP-HEAD CORPSE

by BILL ERIN

A NOVELET OF DOPE AND DEATH—COMING NEXT ISSUE!



I didn't hear right." He paused, then with sudden decisiveness, "When you resign from the Department and start business as a private dick, I can probably throw some business your way."

"Resign?" I turned and looked at him. "Private dick?" Realization hit me. I'd saved his life once! Now he was saving mine!

He nodded. "Guys go screwy once every so often. Petticoat fever. Guess we all get it sometime in our lives."

I tried to say something. "She—she—"

I wanted to tell him that I'd really only wanted to help her, that, like the sparrow in my back yard, she was bruised, beaten, grounded and I'd only wanted to help her. But it was something that was too hard to explain.

Of course Betty threw a party. A party

well as in the Police Department, rounding up all those frightful hoodlums. And not only is my son a double hero, but he's sort of a Father Flannigan, in his own way. I want to announce that tonight he's saved his eighth boy from taking the road to crime. Oh, yes, he's more or less started his own little Boy's Town."

Tears swam in my eyes. The phone was ringing. I hurried to the hall and answered it, thankful for the chance to get out of the room.

It was a wrong number.

I put down the receiver and sat there, staring at the phone, feeling a need to cry. From the hallway, I could hear my mother, still holding the floor:

"Oh, yes, I mean it," she was saying. "My son was almost a gangster once himself. He—"

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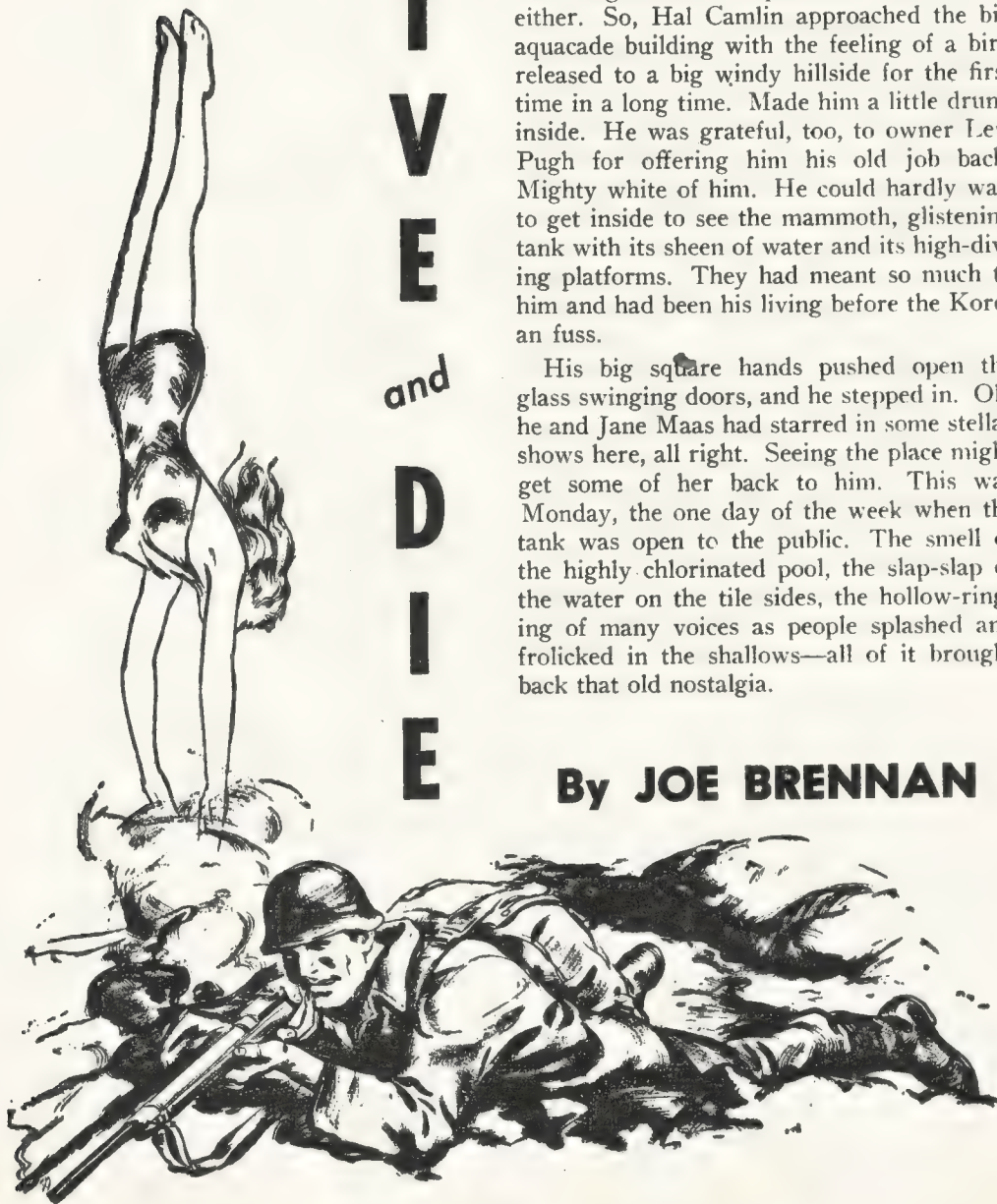
Hal Camlin knew that the face of Death is the same—whether on a Korean battlefield or at the bottom of a diving tank

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THIS PART in the Korean thing had been rough. Rough and tough. And he was happy now to be released to civilian life. These final two months in the San Diego Naval Hospital had been no fun, either. So, Hal Camlin approached the big aquacade building with the feeling of a bird released to a big windy hillside for the first time in a long time. Made him a little drunk inside. He was grateful, too, to owner Lew Pugh for offering him his old job back. Mighty white of him. He could hardly wait to get inside to see the mammoth, glistening tank with its sheen of water and its high-diving platforms. They had meant so much to him and had been his living before the Korean fuss.

His big square hands pushed open the glass swinging doors, and he stepped in. Oh, he and Jane Maas had starred in some stellar shows here, all right. Seeing the place might get some of her back to him. This was Monday, the one day of the week when the tank was open to the public. The smell of the highly chlorinated pool, the slap-slap of the water on the tile sides, the hollow-ringing of many voices as people splashed and frolicked in the shallows—all of it brought back that old nostalgia.

By JOE BRENNAN



But here was that awful ache within him again. His mind reeled a little as he tried to grasp it. Jane—Jane Maas, the girl he had planned on marrying, wouldn't be diving with him any more. Jane of the laughing way and the incredible figure was dead! How could he go on? He caught his lips between his teeth and acknowledged that she'd want him to carry on with the same act. The same fancy diving act—only now with her young sister, Dolly, whom he had yet to meet.

He looked up at the high springboard from where Jane had made her last dive. Her "accidental" dive to death while he had been in Korea, slugging it out with a kind of people who would rob all men of liberty. His stomach wrenched, not at sight of the tower's dizzying height, but at the thought of Jane's lovely body and beautiful face having rocketed from that platform to the hard tile below. A sodden mass of splintered bone and red-raw flesh. He had to look away.

Hal suddenly hated this place. He had lost Jane here. Leadenly, he dragged his feet to the stairway leading to the mezzanine and the aquacade's business office. He knew now he didn't want his old diving job back. But he'd have to take it if he wanted to check on this thing that was chewing at him. This thing about Jane—the mystery of it!

But here was owner Lew Pugh now—the long, lean, dapper guy. "Welcome back, Hal!" came the man's greeting. "You've been missed!"

AND THEN Hal was shaking hands with the aquacade magnate and his assorted office helpers. Pretty girls, these clerks and stenogs; you had to hand it to Pugh on that. And they were making Hal feel right at home. But none of it could fill the vacuum that was within Hal. It was a physical ache that tore him all up inside.

"Boss," he said, "thanks a pack for giving me my job back. I'm going to repay you by accepting—and being a fancier diver than I ever was."

Pugh's eagerness was bubbling now. Hal saw it and thought about it. A champagne guy with champagne tastes and ways. "Good!" pronounced Pugh. "We need you. Need you badly—particularly with the wa-

ter-clown act you pull at the finale."

"Th—that's the part I've got to leave out," stammered Hal. He'd hoped he could ease it to Pugh, but the latter's statement had brought the thing out into the open too soon. "I—I've got no heart for it," Hal went on. "I don't feel funny on the inside any more, so I can't be funny on the outside—"

"Ever hear of Pagliacci?" Pugh put in, pushing carefully at his well-groomed hair with every curl pluperfectly in place. "Time will set you right."

The casual way the man said it; the indifference, the callousness of it— It detonated a little late in Hal like a time-bomb not properly gauged. The thoughts of Jane's body, crumpled and misshapen on the hard-tiled bottom of the empty pool, hit him with the impact of a falling wall.

"Time—hell!" Hal thundered. "Jane was murdered! And I mean to track down whoever did it!"

The silence in the office became a solid, leaning thing. Not a typewriter clacked, not a pencil scraped. Then Lew Pugh was holding onto Hal's bicep and saying, "Look, kid, you've had it rugged over there in Korea. You—you're just out of the hospital, and there's such a thing as battle fatigue—"

In the next instant, Pugh was walking comradeship with Hal along the rail of the mezzanine. "Get back to your old trade here, Hal. Lose yourself in it. Our big Saturday night shows will be bigger than ever now with you back as the star attraction. You and Jane's sister. You'll get that Oriental misery out of your system."

"Oriental!" Hal scoffed. "That's not my problem. It's the loss of Jane that's eating at me. The way she was lost." He turned and faced Pugh. "Who was up on that platform with her? A couple of the girls were jealous of her. Maybe she was shoved—"

"I tell you, Hal, she was brooding after getting word that you were missing in action. She was doped up, too. Spent all her money on narcotics. She—"

"I don't want to hear that kind of talk," Hal interrupted. Again he was being beaten numb by all the details he'd learned while in the hospital. There was the talk and the news columns about how Jane Maas had

climbed to the platform one night when no one else was in the pool. It seems she had wanted to practise alone to improve some of her high-dives. And she had dived into the tank after it had been drained of all its water. For the thousandth time, Hal told himself that she wouldn't have made the dive had the big metal signs, reading EMPTY!, been posted in both spots at the ends of the pool.

And what about some of the other mysterious things? His and her joint bank account had been totally withdrawn; no word from Jane during those last months in Korea before he'd been gobbled up by Red Koreans; the talk of her having become a dope addict—Often he had wondered if she had ever received any of his letters of those last months before he'd been taken prisoner. And what about the ones after he'd escaped and returned to his own company?

"Meet Dolly Maas," came Pugh's words, breaking in on Hal's bitter reverie. "Dolly, this is Hal—your new partner in the show."

Hal shook her hand and gaped openly at the startling resemblance between her and her dead sister. Everything the same—even to the red hair spun so finely and glisteningly on Dolly's head. Even Dolly's "Oh, hello, Hal—" shook him to his ankles. The tonal quality and the wide, free smile—all of it made his heart stand still. But for perhaps two inches in height and two years in birthdays, here was Jane Mass, standing before him in all her beautiful glory.

PUGH briefed them on what he expected in the way of a "brother and sister" diving act, then he left them alone when he was called to the phone.

In the quiet of the far end of the mezzanine Hal and Dolly talked. In a little they were talking of the things that make adults cry. He was telling her the things he couldn't tell anyone else. "Jane was brave," he insisted. "She had faith—and would have hung on till my body was sent home in a box."

"You *did* love her so, didn't you?" Dolly said quietly.

"With all my heart."

Then Dolly opened Hal's eyes to some-

thing new. "I've got Jane's last letter which she mailed to you. It was returned unclaimed from Korea, and I've got it in my safety deposit box at the bank."

"Why in a bank?" he asked absently.

"Because someone wanted either that letter or the telegram from the War Department which advised Jane of your being missing in action."

"How do you know someone wanted either one of them?"

"After she died, our apartment was burglarized and nothing was touched but letters and papers." She tapped at her bust. "I was away at the time and had both envelopes in here."

"Who knew you had them?" Hal came back, and his interest was coming alive.

"I remarked about it to some of the girls down at the aquacade office. You see, Jane always posted and received her mail through the office there and—well, this was the only letter she ever got back from Korea. It was the only wire, too, which she had received direct at her apartment."

Like a beagle nosing through bracken, Hal began ransacking the facts already apparent. Probably none of Jane's later letters ever actually got posted from the Pugh office. Also, probably none of his own got through to Jane. Probably a lot of things—And why would anyone at the aquacade want to intercept Jane's and Hal's correspondence? Dolly could give no sane answer to that, except to say that maybe it all stemmed from jealousy on the part of one of the girls. "After all," she said, "Jane wasn't the only girl in the show who thought you were tall, tan, and terrific."

Dolly's wistful smile forced a shy grin from Hal, and he thanked her for saying nice things. But he had a clue now; all he needed was a motive for the criminal—whoever he or she might be. And it stepped up his yen to run the suspect into the ground.

Hal went to the bank with Dolly to see the two envelopes and their contents. His hands shook when he opened the one addressed to himself. And he almost wept with compassion when he read Jane's apology for loaning their joint-savings to Lew Pugh to help him and his aquacade over a temporary finan-

cial slump. "I'm doing it for us as well as Mr. Pugh," she explained in the letter. "He promises to hold your job open till you come back, honey. Says he'll even cut you in as a partner—"

Hal could understand the aquacade being in financial distress—what with Lew Pugh's high living and squandering ways. With only one good eye, Hal could see that Pugh had sold Jane a bill. He wanted to run right back to the aquacade and beat the truth out of the showman. But better judgment told him that he still didn't have the facts to back him up.

But this other envelope; this was the one! The telegram. It was the wire from the War Department, advising Jane that Hal Camlin had been found alive, but wounded, and was in an Allied hospital. The picture all swept back to Hal with its cutting edges. Amnesia from shock and torture by the Reds had, for awhile, robbed him of all memory. His identification papers missing, his dog tag gone. For too, too long he'd been just a number in sick bay at a Naval base. And now as his hands shook, he could see the date that was so all-important. He turned to Dolly.

"Look, just as I thought. The date here proves that Jane died *after* she learned that I was alive. She read this on the sixteenth. Sh-she died on the seventeenth—" A deep, lurching sob racked him as he closed his eyes, waiting for his own private, personal earthquake to pass.

"She wouldn't have taken her life, anyhow," Dolly said softly.

With his eyes still closed, Hal nodded that this was so. Then finding articulation again, added, "No wonder her murderer wanted to get hold of this telegram. It—it kills the suicide theory—"

LEADENLY, Hal and Dolly left the bank, and went to her apartment where she showed him how the burglar had combed the bureau and desk drawers in an effort to find certain papers. All the already-opened envelopes had been investigated, but jewelry and cash had been left untouched. Dolly's assumption that the intruder sought only the two communications now seemed correct.

"What about fingerprints?" Hal asked.

"Did the police locate any?"

"The man wore rubber gloves," Dolly said. "Here's one he dropped in his hurry to get out that window to the fire-escape—" She was pulling an elbow-length, red rubber glove from a dresser drawer.

Hal examined it closely, said, "How come the police didn't pick this up as evidence?"

"I found this one, Hal. The police found the other. I decided to keep one for you in the hope that you'd see some clew in it."

"Then you, too, Dolly, feel as I do about this thing? You—you trust me implicitly?"

She was a little hesitant in answering, her voice coming on a downbeat. "I know Jane—and I think I know you. I've admired you for a long time, Hal. Through Jane—and from afar."

He thought about that for a few moments, finally saying quietly, "With you here, it seems as though Jane has returned." And with the other part of his mind he was acknowledging that he'd seen replicas of this glove down at the aquacade. He thanked Dolly for all the help, told her he'd start practising with her on the following Monday. Then he headed back for the aquacade.

At the aquacade building an hour later, Hal went directly down the stairway to the engineer's office. He found little Burt Sacknett flitting around his maze of pipes, gauges, and valves like a sparrow in a barnyard.

"Hiya, Hal!" the man with the pinched face said, as he stopped his flitting. His bony hand was extended and his face looked more pinched than ever.

Hal ignored the spurious show of welcome, threw one leg over a corner of the engineer's desk, and said sharply, "Sack, we can dispense with the formalities." He and Sack had been acquainted long enough now to have the exact measure of each other. Sack's long stretch in the Big House might be construed as full settlement of his debt to society, but Hal couldn't bring himself to condone the antics of the bird-like guy who was once again flirting with the law.

Twice, the police had picked him up recently for investigation in morals cases. Twice, they had linked him with a narcotic ring and booked him down at headquarters.

But each time Lew Pugh had furnished legal aid to the pasty-looking, little guy and had got him off scot-free. Pugh had always defended his engineer with, "Sacksnett has paid his social bill—and now society is persecuting the poor chap."

Hal watched the nervous Sack make an effort at being nonchalant. There was the cigarette being whipped out with a try at casualness that simply didn't come off. Steeling himself to the prospects of being a self-appointed inquisitor, Hal said, "Suppose you give me the facts surrounding Jane's accident."

Sack went mean in the face for an instant, looked as though he didn't intend to be interrogated at all. Then he apparently thought better of it. "All I can tell you, Hal, is she musta been off her rocker. She dove off that platform right smack into the empty tank."

"Well, what about the big, metal warning signs you're supposed to post around the empty pool?" Hal stood up, stepped closer to the shrinking engineer.

"I—I set 'em up myself," he whimpered. "I set 'em up just like they're set up out there now. The tank's drainin' right this very minute." He seemed to be shriveling by the second. "Y-you musta read the facts in the papers—"

"I was away fighting a war. Remember?" Hal moved closer again, watched the little ex-con retreat another step and rub his hands into one another as though they were frost-bitten. Examining them closer, Hal saw that they were inflamed and raw from some ugly skin disorder. "What's the matter with your dukes?" he said.

Obviously glad to duck other questioning, Sack cheeped, "I gotta infection. I'm allergic to all this chlorine in the swimmin' water."

"Why don't you take some precautionary measure?" put in Hal. "Rubber gloves would do the trick."

A GAIN, as though all this were a reprieve, Sack started with gusto, "I do. I gotta—" He suddenly blanched and lowered his pip-squeak of a voice. "Ah, I can take it. I'm gettin' used to the stinkin' disinfectant—" A spluttering gurgle from outside

the engine room told of the last several gallons of water draining out of the tank. Sack had made a move to leave, but now elected to remain. "I started to say," he continued, "that I use gloves when I have to turn any of the valves that's got chlorinated water on 'em. Plastic gloves."

"Let's see the gloves," Hal said, trying to conceal his eagerness.

Jumping with tension, Sack blurted, "I'm all outta gloves right now. That's why my hands is in such bad shape."

Hal studied the infected hands and forearms again, calculated that maybe the little guy had probably destroyed the last of the rubber gloves that used to be in stock. "Okay, forget it, Sack," he said. "I came down tonight to get in a few practise dives. I go to work for Pugh again Monday."

"But you can't practise tonight," Sack came back. "I tol' you I emptied the tank."

"Well, you'll be giving it a refill tonight, won't you? And I won't want to practise for a couple of hours."

Sack just shrugged his bony shoulders like a petrel, preparing to take flight. "I'll put the whole three pumps on 'er an' shove the water up to nine feet in a hour."

"Thanks. I'll head for the dressing rooms and get my gear and stuff organized." Hal moved on out of the maze of pipes, boilers, valves, et cetera, and felt Sack's eyes blinking on him as he went up the stairs.

The instant he got far enough up from the engineer's room, Hal hurriedly scooted through a side door to the glass-topped arcade housing the big empty tank, and there he scrambled up the ladder to the top diving platform. High, and out of sight by lying down and hugging the deck of the platform, he peered cautiously down onto the tiled tank below. He waited for developments.

In less than thirty seconds, he saw diminutive Sack stick his head out from the engine room door and crane his neck as he checked to make sure no one was in sight. Then the man hurried to the mammoth valve at the deep end of the pool. While standing before the big wheel, Sack continued furtively surveying the areas up and down the runways. From his jacket he pulled a pair of red rubber gloves and slipped them on.

Instantly, he was closing the water outlet by turning the handwheel of the chlorine-splashed Globe valve. Next, he was spinning the wheel at an adjacent valve to let in the new supply of water. The moment he finished his chore, he headed back for the engine room, pulling off the gloves rapidly as he went. There was something frantic in his haste, and Hal saw it.

Hal scrambled down from his perch with the speed of a gibbon and ran for the engine room. He caught Sack just in the act of pulling open the furnace door and starting to throw in the rubber gloves.

"No, you don't!" Hal barked as he grabbed the man's wrists.

"They're no good!" cried Sack. "I—I always chuck 'em away when they're wore out—"

But Hal yanked them from the runty guy's hands and stood there examining them. Then he pulled from his coat pocket the one glove which Dolly had found in her apartment. They matched exactly; same size, color, make. The manufacturer's label was plainly imprinted upon the cuff of each one. Hal held them up to the retreating Sack.

"Look," Hal said, "and here's the one you left in Dolly Maas' apartment—" He strode toward the engineer as the latter continued stepping backward with his hands groping blindly for the desk. When Sack reached it, he fumbled for the top right-hand drawer, pulling it out with a jerk. Instantly, he was frantically ransacking it for something. Hal grappled with him. "None of that!" Hal said, wrenching Sack away from the desk and sending the drawer splatting to the floor.

PANICKED, Sack's eyes still sought the strewn contents of the drawer, and it was obvious that what he wanted wasn't there. His beady eyes swept up to Hal again as though the answer might be here. "You got my gun, too?" he squeaked as he kicked out at Hal's groin.

Hal lurched back, blocking the kick with his forearm. Now Sack had grabbed the letter-opener from the desk and was stabbing at Hal's face. Sharp punctures into the cheekbone made Hal grab for the man again. He throttled the skinny throat, pressing his fin-

gers into it till the letter-opener quit stabbing. "Talk, damn you!" he demanded. "Talk! Give me the facts or I'll kill you right here!"

Sack's vulture-like eyes bugged and began to film over. His tongue distended. Then he tried to babble something. Hal let up enough to allow jumbled words to spill out.

"I—I did it for Pugh. H-he paid me—"

"Paid you for what?" grated Hal. He squeezed the throat again, then released it sufficiently for some articulation.

"P-paid me to comb Dolly's apartment for a letter an' telegram. He promised me two hunnerd bucks to comb the joint."

Hal looked vacantly at the backs of his hands which were still straining with their grip on Sack's throat. "Then Pugh is my man—" Hal said in a voice that wobbled. "Tell me more—and clear yourself!" he demanded.

It must have sounded like a reprieve to Sack, for the little engineer began babbling more rapidly. Apparently he was sure he was talking for his life now. "Pugh's been interceptin' all of Jane's other mail at the office. Trapped everything but the two messages that went direct to her apartment."

A desire to crush this cringing excuse for a man tapped at Hal's brain. His fingers tightened. Sack's eyes bugged as he spluttered, "Pugh never paid me the two hunnerd—" Hal let up a little. Sack went on, "I—I tell you, everything I did was what he made me do. Drainin' the tank on a night when it was supposed to stay full was his idea. He knew Jane was comin' down to practise some dives alone."

"But the EMPTY signs!" broke in Hal. "What about the EMPTY signs? Were they posted?" He gripped Sack viciously with one hand, slapped him hard to the face with the other one.

Sack's breathing was now the sound of a panting dog. "L-listen!" he choked. "They was posted okay. Th-then Pugh ditched 'em just before Jane come in an' climbed up to the platform. He made me have lockjaw about it."

"How could he *make* you? Tell me that!" Hal was afraid he might kill this human vermin before he had all the facts out of him.

He let up a little, wiped his own bleeding cheeks against the sleeves of his extended arms.

"He was gonna phone my warden up North an' tell him how I'm bustin' my parole—"

The back of Hal's neck chilled as though someone had suddenly opened a refrigerator door. Instinctively, he knew someone was to the rear of him. Retaining his grip on Sack, he turned and looked into the face of immaculate Lew Pugh. The owner was gloved and leveling a gun at him.

"Fine thing, Hal," Pugh said dryly. "You've set it up just right for your own death. Let go of Sack!"

"You're a dirty murderer!" Hal blurted.

"Just the same," came Pugh, "you're going to die now. The way Sack's face is marked up, any jury would agree that you sought revenge on him for Jane's *accidental* death, and that I caught you in the act of attacking him."

HAL was seeing the whole rotten picture now. It was clearing up. He let loose of Sack, said to Pugh, "You talked Jane into putting all her money and mine into your stinking business, then you got rid of her—"

"Smart deduction," interrupted Pugh with a smile. "So, she made a bad investment. What are you going to do about it, Hawkshaw?"

Hal saw the gloved hand tighten on the revolver's butt, expected it to bark any instant now. Somehow, it didn't seem to make so much difference. Jane was gone—

"Th-that's my gun!" broke in Sack, pointing at the revolver in Pugh's hand. "Don't shoot him with my gun. I'll be the fall guy again!"

Pugh grinned at Sack. "I borrowed it, Sack, pal. It was the only one in the building. I had a feeling this cheap carnival-diver would be crazy enough to come back and stir up a fuss. But I'll shoot him dead, then you'll have something to hold over me—just as I have Jane's murder to hold over you."

"But *you* moved the signs!" broke in the whimpering engineer.

"Shut up!" cracked Pugh.

Without taking his eyes off Pugh, Hal said to the engineer, "Sack, use your head.

Can't you see that by your boss using your gun to kill me, you'll be charged with my murder?"

"You shut up, too, Hal!" Pugh ordered. Then to his engineer again, "Sack, the two hundred dollars I owe you are upstairs in my lower, left-hand desk drawer. Go get it, while I knock off this wise water-clown who should have stayed in Korea where he was safe."

Apparently the usually timid engineer was beginning to take a little courage from his miraculous deliverance from Hal. "No hurry on that, boss. I might as well—"

"I said go up there!" barked Pugh. "When this gun explodes and our diving pal here pitches onto his face, some passing patrolman might hear it and break in. I want things to look normal, so spread a few letters around on my desk as though I'd been doing nightwork when I heard this ruckus in the basement here. It'll validate my being here."

Obviously, Sack was mulling it over slowly in his unimaginative mind. He finally nodded his head as though once again his employer were a genius. "Sure nuff," he said. "I'll go." With that he turned and scurried out the door toward the staircase.

The instant Sack disappeared and his feet could be heard tramping up the stairway, Pugh leered smugly, "Now, I'll blast you, Mister Smart Guy. And when the dumb runt comes back squawking that he couldn't find the whole two hundred dollars, I'll shoot him, too."

Without averting his eyes from Hal, he threw back his head and laughed dryly. "Sack'll be spread out here alongside you—with a hundred dollars of my currency in his pocket. A pat case for the police."

"You're going in for murder on a wholesale scale," said Hal in a voice that didn't at all sound like his own.

Pugh's smile was dirty and thin. "Get this," he said, "I never was a small-fry retailer. Not even in murder. I do things up right. Sack will be found dead here alongside you. And with his own gun in his hand, he'll be a suicide in the eyes of the police. I'll swear he confessed to your murder when I found him standing over your body."

Sweating it out, Hal was trying to stave

off the moment when Pugh would squeeze that trigger. He was satisfied that he was going to get it, but he'd have to first unload a few things from his mind. "You were a brave gent to make little Jane your victim. Take a deep, low bow." Desperately, he reached for more words in order to stall for time. "And then to spread lies about her using heroin—"

"Who knows the facts but you and me? And now you won't be around to spill them." Pugh laughed again. "It's a pity."

"Knowing Jane was going to practise alone in your tank, you deliberately had the pool drained. I know what it can be like to be up on the platform of that tower when no one's in the pool. It's flat and crystal clear—and it's hard to believe that there's really water in it. No wonder poor Jane didn't know it was empty—"

Inarticulate now, he could picture her making her last swan dive from that great height—a thing of grace and speed and timing. Then the horrifying impact between flesh, bone and tile— He shuddered.

PUGH was breaking in on Hal's awesome reverie again. "And here's a thought you can take along to hell with you, dummy," he was saying. "Dolly's my next loot. I know you'll love that—because I saw the way you were with her on the mezzanine."

"You sadist, you!" Hal grated. "You dirty, damn sadist, you!" And he tried to grasp the monstrous fact that this murderer wasn't even satisfied to send a man to death without first telling him of how he was going to hurt someone else. *Dolly next!* went blistering into Hal's mind like a red-hot branding iron. Little Dolly! Alone—with no one to protect her; no one to warn her! Hal wanted to weep as he swayed there helplessly. He looked into the barrel of the gun as it came up slowly and tried to tell himself it was all a bad dream.

Footsteps were pounding up the steps of the staircase. Sack came in breathless and goggle-eyed just behind Hal. "How we gonna work this now?" he panted. "Dolly Maas is comin' in through the side door with her own key." He fought for air. "An—an' somebody's comin' in with her!"

"Hal!" came the clear, bell-like call from up above. "Where are you, Hal?" It was tinged with worry and fear, yet the soft, throaty, tonal quality was so like Jane's that it made the blood pulse in Hal's brain. He could hear his own breathing even above the raggedness of Sack's puffing.

Hal saw Pugh glance to the door leading to the staircase. That split instant was enough. Spanning around and grabbing Sack, Hal whirled the runty engineer between himself and Pugh. Two fast shots went into Sack's body as the little man screamed like a stabbed horse.

There was no third shot, for Hal had shoved Sack's sagging body straight into Pugh with a force that knocked the owner's head back against the furnace door. The gun went spinning as Pugh and Sack crumpled together to the floor like a house of cards on impact. Hal lurched forward and scooped up the gun in one, sweeping motion. But his hurry was wasted effort, for neither Pugh nor Sack were getting up.

A little short sighing "Ohhh—" back of Hal told him that Dolly was in the room. He turned, looked into her wide eyes and heard her say, "Y-you're hurt, Hal—" Obviously, she was blanching from the sight of the stab-wounds on Hal's face. Her arms came around him and her face pressed into his chest with a sobbing that, for all the world, was like Jane. It was like the time she had seen him off to sea at San Diego so many months ago. Then he was looking past Dolly and seeing the two cops who were with her.

"Officers," Hal said, "all you've got is my word on this whole mess—" He made a sweeping, futile gesture toward the two fallen men.

But both officers were already pushing on past to the prostrate forms. Pugh was still out cold, but Sack was holding his hand at his bleeding chest and trying to talk. The policemen bent to him to try and hear his babbling. Hal and Dolly, too, stepped closer to catch the words. The engineer was pointing at prone Pugh.

"In—in the eyes of God," Sack mumbled, "Pugh an' I killed Jane. I—I drained the tank. He moved the danger signs—"

When it was apparent that Sack didn't

intent to say any more, Hal stooped, said, "How come you tell us this now?"

For an instant it looked like there was no longer a spark of life in Sack. But shortly his words came through the red-flecked lips again: "I—I went along with the guy till I found there wasn't no two hunnerd bucks in that desk." He reached deep for one more breath. "Th-they was only a hunnerd—" His chin sagged and it was obvious that he was through; through with talking and breathing; through for all time. The officers turned their attention to Lew Pugh.

"He's still out like three strikes," Hal said. "You'll have to get his story later. Mine, you can have anytime."

WHILE one officer tended to Pugh's deep scalp wound, the other one phoned for an ambulance. Meanwhile, Hal listened to Dolly's quiet explanation of how she had been afraid Hal was down here and in trouble. In her throaty way, she said, "Hal, you looked like a crusader when you left my apartment. Nothing—absolutely nothing—was going to

stop you from finding Jane's killer."

Hal nodded down at the two men on the floor. "Looks like I squared her away. A little, at least—" Then something twisted within him. Perhaps it was Dolly's soft, red hair that did it. Perhaps it was her very fragrance, for she was standing so close. Futilely, Hal pointed toward Pugh and Sack again. "B-but none of this can bring Jane back to us—" The instant he said it, he was sorry, and he wanted to take it back.

But Dolly was even closer now. She was again looking up into his face. He remembered now that Jane, too, had always looked up into his eyes this way—Free and believing. And while he thought about it, a thin breath escaped Dolly and her shoulders went down with it. "I—I'll try to fill—"

She didn't have to say any more. Hal smothered her face against his shoulder, pressed his lips to the sheen of her hair. She wouldn't have to try anything; not anything. She was already Jane Maas incarnate—and could he ask for anything more? His lips moved and he thanked his Maker for Dolly.

MASTER SLEUTHS

LISTED BELOW, in jumbled fashion, are 15 of the top "master sleuths" in fiction, together with the authors who created them. Let's see if you can match up at least 11 of these sleuths with the correct authors for a passing score. 12-to-14 is excellent; 15 perfect.

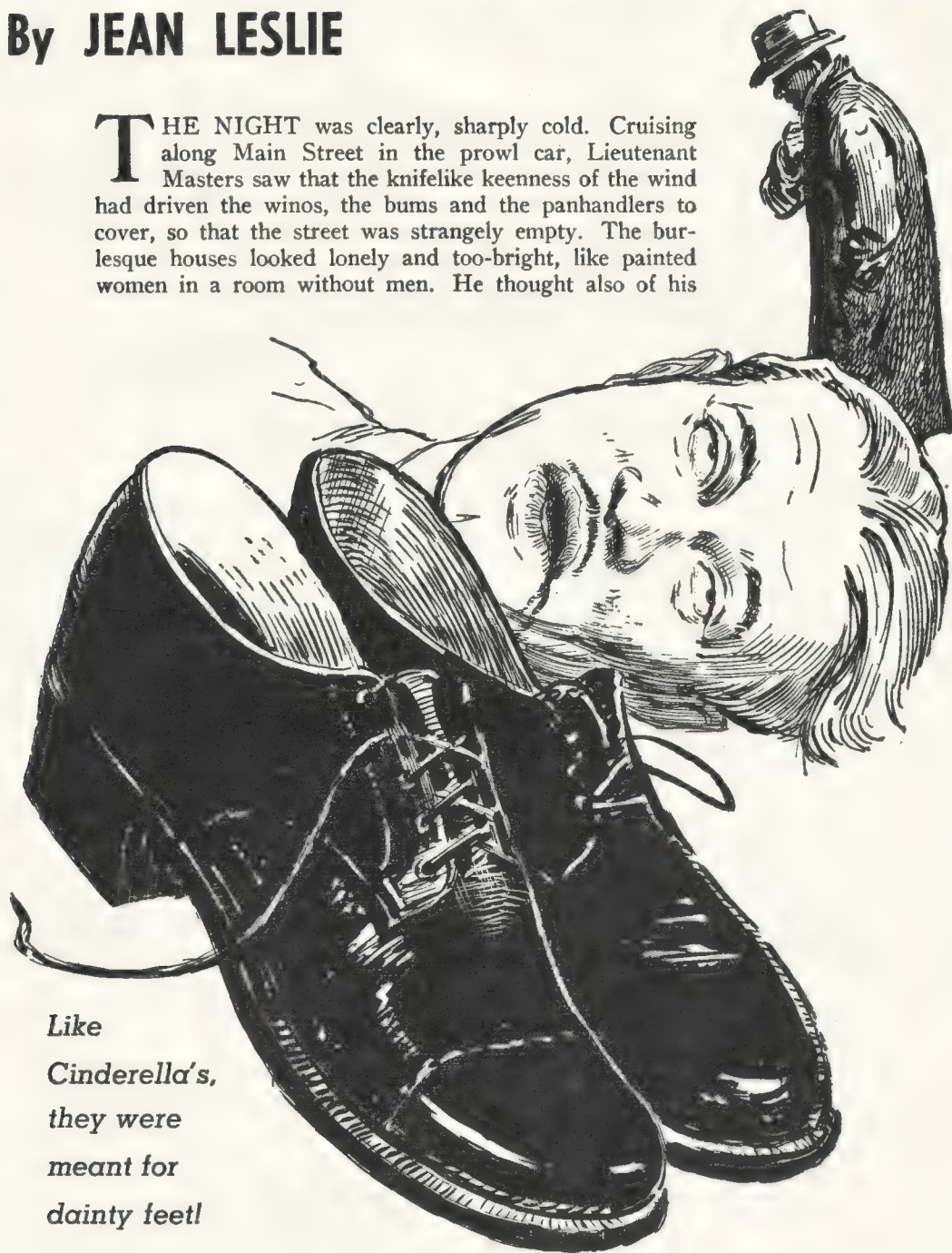
- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. "THE SAINT" | (a) FRANK GRUBER |
| 2. SHERLOCK HOLMES | (b) JOHN P. MARQUAND |
| 3. PERRY MASON | (c) FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE |
| 4. NERO WOLFE | (d) DASHIELL HAMMETT |
| 5. "THE FALCON" | (e) RAYMOND CHANDLER |
| 6. PHILO VANCE | (f) LESLIE CHARTERIS |
| 7. PHILIP MARLOWE | (g) ERLE STANLEY GARDNER |
| 8. MICHAEL SHAYNE | (h) AGATHA CHRISTIE |
| 9. PAM & JERRY NORTH | (i) CLAYTON RAWSON |
| 10. SAM SPADE | (j) EARL DERR BIGGERS |
| 11. HERCULE POIROT | (k) MICHAEL ARLEN |
| 12. MR. MOTO | (l) A. CONAN DOYLE |
| 13. CHARLIE CHAN | (m) BRETT HALLIDAY |
| 14. "THE GREAT MERLINI" | (n) REX STOUT |
| 15. JOHNNY FLETCHER | (o) S. S. VAN DINE |

(Answers on page 129)

DEAD MAN'S SHOES

By JEAN LESLIE

THE NIGHT was clearly, sharply cold. Cruising along Main Street in the prowl car, Lieutenant Masters saw that the knifelike keenness of the wind had driven the winos, the bums and the panhandlers to cover, so that the street was strangely empty. The burlesque houses looked lonely and too-bright, like painted women in a room without men. He thought also of his



*Like
Cinderella's,
they were
meant for
dainty feet!*

good bed and the comfortable warmth of a glass of hot milk. Masters was a middle-aged widower and his appetites were simple.

Beside him young Peterson was conscious of the sense of security that it gave him to be the hunter instead of the hunted. He was glad he was a patrolman with a good car to drive and a gun on his hip. When he looked at the burlesque houses he thought of them as filled with men like himself who stared hungrily at the plump powdered bodies of the strippers.

With Masters and Peterson rode The Voice. It was a curiously dull voice that interrupted their thoughts to say, "Cars Seven-nine and Eight-three, attention. Attention, cars Seven-nine and Eight-three; Proceed to the corner of Fifth and San Pedro." And then the code, "Four-two-o-four. Four-two-o-four. Cars Seven-nine and Eight-three, attention. Fifth and San Pedro. Four-two-o-four."

A bunch of drunks tearing up some cheap bar, Masters thought. He was glad their car had not been called. He always felt sorry for drunks.

"Out of our district," Peterson said unnecessarily. He flexed his big muscles and yawned. "I wouldn't mind tangling with a few drunks tonight," he said. Peterson hated drunks as he hated all weak things. He swung around the corner onto Commercial Street and cruised east, then north, then west. At Hill Street he turned again and was just in time to see a pale yellow convertible slip across the street. "We better get a look at those plates," he said cheerfully. "There was a yellow Chrysler on the hot sheet this evening."

THE convertible began to pick up speed. "It's on the sheet, all right," Masters admitted. "I'll check it. Car Eight-eight. Car Eight-eight. Checking the hot sheet. Light yellow convertible. Chrysler. Nineteen-fifty." While Masters gave the license number and waited for the check Peterson kept an even half-block behind the other car.

Peterson was hoping the car was still hot and that there would be a good chase before he caught it. Masters was hoping the Chrysler had been scratched from the list

because he did not consider stealing a car a very serious offense. Not as serious, for instance, as the kind of stealing that went on across the desks of some big companies. Besides, he hated to ride with Peterson when the siren was screaming and Peterson's big foot lay heavy on the gas pedal.

"Car Eight-eight. Car Eight-eight," said The Voice. "That car is still hot. Report. Over."

The yellow convertible leapt forward as the siren whined. Masters braced his feet against the floor and thought of his warm bed and the glass of hot milk. At the next corner the Chrysler swung sharply to the left and disappeared down a short dark hill. The patrol car shortened the distance between them and the siren screamed imperatively. Another corner, and the tires made a raw sound in the night. The yellow car had disappeared. Peterson braked sharply and swore.

"Down there," Masters said tiredly. "He'll be down by that alley." He didn't want to chase the car any further, but the habit of duty was strong.

Peterson backed the sedan and shot down the side street—and there was the convertible, as Masters had known it would be. For a moment their headlights pinned a small figure as it jumped from the car ahead of them. "He's leaving the car!" Peterson said. "He's going down the alley!" Already he had his gun out of the holster and was fumbling with the safety catch of the revolver.

Masters laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Easy, son," he cautioned. "You won't need that." He opened the door and the wind lifted him out. With Peterson at his heels he ran lightly along the side of the building. His eyes were accommodating themselves to the blackness and he detected a shape ahead of him.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "We want to check your registration slip!"

The deeper shadow moved away and Masters could hear fast light footsteps falling on the cobblestones. "Stop or I'll fire!" he shouted.

The little patter of sound grew as the man began to run. In the frosty stillness the sound

of his shoes was loud and clear. It echoed off of the buildings so that it sounded like several men running.

He's a little man, Masters thought. A boy, maybe. Someone small and agile. The sound grew fainter.

"He's going to get away!" Peterson's big frame trembled with eagerness and Masters was reminded of a bloodhound straining at the leash.

"He can't get away," he said regretfully. "It's a dead-end. The kid's trapped." He knew all of these areaways; knew which ones were blind alleys. Only a novice would have picked this one. He slapped his cold hands together to warm them.

"Keep close to the wall," he advised Peterson, "and don't turn on your flashlight. He'll discover there's nothing back there but a private parking lot surrounded by two-story buildings. He'll have to come back this way and he may come out fighting."

Masters leaned against the wall and folded his arms over the sick tension in his stomach. He hated the weeks when he was on night duty. Presently he heard the footsteps again. *Clok. Clok. Clok.* They were slow and cautious as though the boy was feeling his way in the darkness. *Clok-clok-clok.* He was picking up speed. The sound was louder. *Clockity-clockity-clok.* He was trotting toward them. The sound bounced around in the lonely night.

"Stay where you are," Masters said quietly. "We have you covered." The man didn't stop. In panic he was running straight into their arms. Masters felt Peterson's gun arm come up. "Over his head!" he ordered. The gun barked. There was a soft sighing sound and the shadow slid to the ground.

Masters stepped forward and turned on his flashlight. "You hit him!" he said wonderingly. "Right in the chest. Why?"

"It was him or us."

"He wasn't armed. The poor little devil was just scared. Go back and phone for an ambulance."

Peterson hurried away.

Masters knelt down beside the boy on the pavement.

"I'm sorry," he said sympathetically. "Is the pain bad?"

EYES as black as shoe-buttons looked back at him, glazed with fear. Under a hairline mustache the lips moved, but the answer was in a language that Masters did not know. He contented himself by saying, "Sure, son. Everything will be okay." He drew the boy's overcoat around him to hide the dark stain that was spreading over his white shirt. "I'm sorry," he said again.

Only a boy. Twenty, maybe. He was small and slight, with dark eyes and hair like patent leather. The boy was wearing a cheap plaid suit and a fitted overcoat and beautiful pointed light brown shoes. The shoes had cost a lot of money. They had big heels to give the kid an extra inch, and the leather was soft and highly-polished.

Another siren whined and was still and then two men came in and lifted the boy to the stretcher. A photographer's bulb flashed and for a moment they were all bathed in the blue-white light of day. The boy reached out a thin brown hand to Masters and spoke again.

"Anybody understand what he said?" Masters asked.

One of the attendants leaned over and said, "Come again, bud. What was it?" He listened to the soft liquid speech and then he turned to Masters and said, "Something about his mother. He says not to tell her what he did. That mean anything to you?"

Masters shook his head. "Let it go for now. Somebody from the station house can talk to him later at the hospital."

The attendant turned a flashlight on the boy's chest. "Are you kidding?" . . .

"He didn't have to shoot, Jake," Masters said later. The coffee had been hot inside of him but his face still looked pinched and cold. "He had no call to *kill* the boy!"

"Peterson's a damn fool." The police captain bit savagely at the end of his cigar. "I know how you feel, Jim. I feel the same way. But what can I do? These rookies are all trigger-happy. Sometimes I think they're yellow. Seems like they have to have a gun in their hands to feel like men." He puffed angrily, sending out clouds of hot acrid smoke. "Well, he's my problem, not yours. You did all you could, Jim. Go home now and get some sleep. I'll put you back on a

daytime shift next week, and I'll talk to Peterson."

Masters rose slowly and pulled his coat together. "He was only a kid," he said slowly. "He shouldn't have died, Jake. He didn't look like a bad kid."

"He wasn't, Jim. Not yet. But he'd always been dirt poor and he wanted nice things. Like these shoes, for instance." He put out his hand and ran it over the polished surface of the small brown shoes. "He'd steal to get things like this. In time he might have killed for them. It's funny," he said thoughtfully, "how liking nice things can cost a kid his life."

"Not funny, Jake." Masters paused with one big thumb thrust through his buttonhole. "What did you tell his mother?" he asked.

"We let her think someone had lent him the car and that the kid didn't know it was hot. She'll never know any different. She doesn't speak English."

"That was nice of you. Good night, Jake."

"Good night, Jim." . . .

It was a big white house with trees around it and a gold-lettered sign on the lawn that said ETERNAL REST MORTUARY. An old truck rattled to a stop at the curb and a man climbed down and walked around to the back. "It's Benny," he called in a sing-song voice. "Any clothes today for the mission?"

A young man in a white jacket laid down the paper he was reading. "You can have what there is, Benny." From a cabinet he took a suit, some pajamas, and a pair of highly polished brown shoes.

Benny turned the garments over critically; lifted the shoes and looked at the soles. "Good shoes," he conceded. "But small. Fives. Not many men can wear fives. I'll take them anyway. Thanks a lot." . . .

DOCTOR ANTON KASL wrapped his thin coat around him and shivered in the cold wind. He had been standing in line for more than an hour and his legs ached. He could bear the cold and hunger—even the humiliation—but the stabbing pains in his legs filled him with a black despair. They were a cruel reminder of the miles he had walked while stupid Nazi swine barked or-

ders at him. They were reminders of the laboratory he had left and the sons who had died and the glory that was gone. They were reminders of poverty, and this terrible loneliness, and this strange country where his talents went unnoticed.

The line inched ahead. Doctor Kasl closed his eyes and tried not to think. He did not want to acknowledge the greed with which his lank stomach waited for the thin soup the mission would give him. He did not want to hope that today he would find the kind of work his pride demanded. He wanted to shut out the cold wind and the stale smell of the man in front of him and the ignominy of being shabby and unhonored. He wanted to escape from the bitterness of living.

"Wake up, pop!" The voice was brightly, spuriously friendly. "What'll it be this time?"

Doctor Kasl flushed. "I go to look for the position," he said stiffly. "There is the want of a technician. If I can to have the shoes, I will most grateful be."

The young man grinned. "We'll fix you up, pop. Come on in out of the wind. Joe! Pair of shoes for our friend here. Fix him up good." He patted Doctor Kasl on the back and pushed him into the room behind him.

"My foot is small," Doctor Kasl said to Joe. "The last shoes they are too big."

Joe rummaged through a big carton of old shoes, handling them deftly, examining the soles, tossing each pair aside. "It don't pay to be too choosy about size, pop," he advised. "A good sole is what you want to look for."

"I cannot to wear what does not fit," Doctor Kasl said coldly. "These last ones are the shoes of a *peasant*. Please to look at them!"

"Nothing wrong with plain folks," Joe said good-naturedly. "That's what most of us are." He pulled a second box from beneath the table and began examining the shoes. "Here you are, pop," he called. "Made to order for you. How do you like the look of these?"

He handed over a pair of highly-polished brown shoes; small and pointed, with tall heels. Doctor Kasl's heart went out to the

shoes. They were expensive ones, and almost new. And so elegant! His fingers trembled with eagerness as he unknotted the laces. Seated on a packing box he slipped his feet into the dead man's shoes. They were too narrow but his pride would not let him notice the tightness. They were *his* shoes. They would make him look tall and prosperous. No one would dare to offer the wearer of such shoes a menial job. "These are to fit very good," he said softly. "Long ago I had such shoes as these."

"Okay, pop. Glad we could fit you. Get a bowl of soup before you start out after that job."

With the new shoes on his feet and the soup in his stomach, Doctor Kasl felt almost cheerful. The shoes pinched, but they gave him confidence. With these shoes he would get the position in the laboratory. They would see at a glance that he was a man of substance; a successful man. He leaned into the wind and began to walk the weary blocks.

Four hours later he walked back the same long way, but now the heels of the shoes struck the pavement slowly. The shoes were very tight and the pains in his legs were sharp and cruel. There had been no position for him, in spite of his elegance. Someone younger had been engaged, someone who spoke English, someone known to the Director. The woman at the desk had been very sympathetic; but one could not eat sympathy.

Doctor Kasl paused on the big bridge and the wind cut through his thin clothes. He leaned against the guard rail and looked yearningly at the dry river bed. The temptation to escape was very strong. That way lay peace. Down there he would be beyond cold and hunger and humiliation. In a matter of seconds he could sleep without remembering.

THE thought was not new and he pushed it away as he had pushed it away for years. Tomorrow would be better. This was what he always told himself. He turned to leave—but pain, white-hot, cut his leg from heel to hip. It was pain such as he had never known before; pain that took his

breath away. He sat down on the nearest bench and quickly unlaced the shoes, but the pain stayed with him. Such beautiful shoes!

He wiped the dust from them and stood them neatly beneath the bench. Someone would find them, he hoped. Someone who had need of shoes. The pain was a knife lacerating him. Where he was going he would not need the shoes, or anything else. In spite of the twisting pain he managed to climb to the guard rail. He heard someone shout but he did not turn around. There was a limit to what a man could stand. Doctor Kasl took a deep breath and jumped. . . .

Gimpy Gogan leaned against the parapet and watched the man's body turn lazily as it fell. Crazy fool! he thought. Anybody who wanted to die was a fool. A smart man could always figure an angle, no matter what. Gimpy spat contemptuously.

A crowd began to gather and Gimpy inched away. He was afraid of crowds because crowds meant wallets and jewelry that tempted his nimble fingers. He had killed a woman in Albuquerque and he could not risk being picked up. Not until he had fenced the bracelet he had taken from her.

By the time the police car arrived and the two uniformed officers had gone through to the railing Gimpy was a hundred feet away, staring indifferently at the operations going on below. He stayed there until the police had left and then he sauntered back, scuffling at the papers that littered the bridge. He did this automatically because it was his nature to try to get something for nothing. Sometimes he found things among the empty cigarette packages and the lunch bags: money or keys. Once he had found a cigarette lighter. When he came to the bench where the man had jumped he stopped.

No one else had noticed the shoes, but bright things reached out and found Gimpy as they find magpies and packrats. He walked past the bench and leaned against the railing. Shoes! An almost new pair of shoes! Gimpy could see that they were too small for his feet, but he could sell them for the price of a meal. He looked up and down the bridge to see if anyone was watch-

ing him. There was no one near except a couple of sallow-faced boys and an old man with a cane. They were all regulars who sat on the bridge every day because they had no other place to sit. Gimpy picked up the shoes and walked away.

A half hour later Masters—like Gimpy Gogan—scuffed through the debris that littered the bridge. A woman with a thin painted face left the bench and walked away with studied casualness, gaining speed as she increased the distance between her and the uniform. One of the sallow-faced boys nudged his companion and grinned. When Masters was abreast of them the taller boy said, "Lost something, maybe?"

Masters looked at them gravely. "In a manner of speaking, yes," he said. He did not know the boys. But he would, before they were much older. "The man who killed himself," he said. "Did you see him jump?"

The boys' eyes went into a brief conference. "We were sitting on the other side," the bigger boy said. "We didn't see it happen. We don't know nothing."

"He was in his stocking feet when we picked him up," Masters said. "Seems funny a man would be on the bridge without shoes. I thought he might have left them under a bench, or something."

"We don't know nothing about his shoes."

"Well, thanks anyway." Masters moved past them, stirring the empty bags and the cigarette wrappers with his toe.

AN OLD man with a cane came tap-tap-tapping toward him, holding to the guard rail for support. "Something has been lost?" he asked.

"A pair of shoes. The man who jumped must have left a pair of shoes on the bridge."

The man nodded his head slowly. "I saw him take them off," he said. "He wiped the dust from them and stood them under the seat. When I saw him climb to the railing I called out but I could not reach him in time. God will not forgive him. To destroy life is to destroy God."

"Do you remember which bench he sat on?"

The old man raised his cane and pointed

at the bench where the two boys sat. "This one. The shoes were under this bench."

"We were on the other side of the bridge," the taller boy said quickly. "We never touched the shoes."

"Maybe you saw someone else touch them," Masters suggested. "Maybe you know who took them."

"We didn't see nothing! We didn't come over to this side until we saw you and the other cop drive up, and then we stood down there." He pointed a dirty finger toward the west. "After you drove off, everyone went away except us and the big guy with the gimpy leg. He was lookin' over the railing. After a while he limped off and we noticed the shoes were gone, too."

"This big fellow—is he one of the regulars on the bridge?" Masters asked.

"I know the man they mean," the old man said quietly. "Not his name, but his face. He is evil. He has sold his soul to Satan."

"Did you see him take the shoes?"

"No, but he might have. He lives on Bunker Hill. I can show you the house, if you will take me there."

* * * * *

Fool! Fool! Gimpy Gogan walked up and down his small room pulling angrily at his thin hands. They were clever hands but today he hated them. For nearly six weeks he had kept them out of mischief and now they had betrayed him for a pair of shoes he couldn't wear and was afraid to sell. It would be just his lousy luck to get hooked on a murder rap for pinching a pair of useless shoes.

He thought again of the little woman in Albuquerque. She had sat next to him at the bar and she had seemed to be very drunk. Gimpy had been unable to keep his eyes off of her hands because of the thick diamond and emerald bracelet that winked in the light. When she got up to leave, Gimpy had followed her into the street. Under every street light he saw the tempting gleam of the jewels. When they came to an intersection, he'd stumbled against her and while he mumbled an apology his nimble fingers had felt for the bracelet. He had been care-

less because he thought she was drunker than she was. He was surprised and frightened when she screamed and his fist had shot out and caught her on the chin. He still remembered how startled she had looked before her eyes rolled up and her body slid to the pavement. Somewhere behind him a window had been raised and a car turning the corner had pinned him with a shaft of light. Gimpy had ducked his head and run with the bracelet clutched in his hand.

It was just his lousy luck, of course, that the woman's neck had been broken and that someone had remembered seeing Gimpy in the bar. He was picked up and questioned, but not until he had rigged an alibi. The cops had been forced to let him go because they couldn't prove anything, but he'd never been able to fence the bracelet. He had it still, hidden in a can of coffee.

Since then he'd been plenty careful. Until today. Well, a smart man could always figure an angle. Gimpy took the shoes and wrapped them in an old newspaper. A dozen steps along the hall brought him to the chute where the tenants dropped their refuse into the incinerator. He opened the metal door cautiously and dropped the package. That was that. He'd catch the next bus out of town. Maybe he could get rid of the bracelet in San Francisco. Whether he did or not, it was time he was moving on.

In the basement, Big Sven, the janitor, was cleaning out the incinerator. He could tell that the package was not garbage and so he shook out the papers and found the shoes. They were good shoes. Small, but good. Sven set them out in the alley beside the trash barrel, hoping that someone who needed shoes would see them.

GIMPY GOGAN looked around the room again and then checked the suitcase fanned open on the unmade bed. Everything was packed. It wasn't much because Gimpy had always had to travel light. He moved his two clean shirts and made a place in the corner of the suitcase for the can of coffee. He rubbed his talented hands together and smiled. This time tomorrow he'd be in San Francisco and maybe there would be money in his pocket instead of a little

string of cold bright jewels in a coffee can.

He turned softly as someone knocked on the door. "Who's there?"

"The janitor."

Gimpy turned the key and opened the door a cautious inch. A broad foot slid in, followed by a thick shoulder and Masters' sad face. "Routine questioning," Masters said. "Somebody told me you were on the bridge a little while ago when that man jumped over."

"I don't know anything about it," Gimpy said quickly. "I wasn't there." He tried to close the door but there were two of them and they pushed him back into the room.

Masters' eyes flicked over the shabby room and the open suitcase; came back to the thin sweating face of Gogan. "I've seen you before," he said slowly.

Gimpy's eyes went to his watch. "Not me," he said. "I'm a stranger here. 'Ask your questions and get going.' He couldn't stop sweating. The small cold beads formed on his forehead and slid down his cheeks. They made snails' tracks down his sides. If he had owned a gun, he would have used it. He felt sick and scared and trapped. "You dropped the nickel!" he snarled. "Start talking!"

"You act mighty nervous for a fellow who hasn't been accused of anything," Masters observed. He drifted toward the bed and looked into the suitcase. "You planning on going somewhere?"

"I'm going on a trip! What's it to you?"

"Maybe nothing. I don't know." Masters flipped back the two clean shirts and uncovered the can of coffee.

Gimpy dashed the sweat from his eyes. "I don't know anything about a guy jumping from the bridge!" he said desperately. "That's on the level, copper! I wasn't even on the bridge today!"

"Three people say you were. They think maybe you took a pair of shoes the old man left under a bench." There were no shoes in the suitcase. Masters looked under the bed and found nothing but dust and two tattered newspapers.

"What's so important about a pair of shoes?" Gimpy asked.

Masters came out of the closet. "I don't

know," he said honestly. "The man who committed suicide was wearing an overcoat and we found a hat near him, but no shoes. It looks funny, that's all. Maybe the shoes are important. Maybe not. It's my job to find out."

Gimpy looked at his watch again and tried to smile. "Well, you didn't find no shoes, did you?" he said. "I guess that puts me out in the clear."

"Maybe." Masters came back to the bed and looked at the open suitcase and the can of coffee. "That'll spill when you pick up your suitcase," he observed. "Better put some tape over the lid." He reached out to straighten the shirts he had moved but Gimpy misinterpreted the gesture and snatched the coffee can.

"Looks like you hit the jackpot, Jim," Peterson said happily. "Hand the can over, punk."

Gogan clutched the coffee can to him. "I'll tell you where the shoes are," he babbled. "I took them. I threw them in the incinerator! Come downstairs and I'll show you!"

"Give the can to Lieutenant Masters," Peterson said, "and do it *nice*." His gun butt came down across Gimpy's wrist.

On the floor at their feet the stale coffee grounds were one with the dirty brown rug. Only the bracelet was incongruously clean and bright. Masters picked up the jeweled bracelet and looked at Gimpy sadly. "I remember now," he said. "You're Gogan. Gimpy Gogan. You killed a woman in Albuquerque."

"They let me go," Gogan whined. "They couldn't prove anything!"

"They will now." To Peterson he said, "Take him in, Peterson, I'm going downstairs and see if I can find those shoes."

HIGH above the buildings the sky was streaked with the colors of the setting sun, but in the alley it was already dark and the wind was cold. A man and a child walked slowly along, exploring the trash barrels, skirting the malodorous refuse cans. The child did not notice the odor because he had breathed it much of his short life, but the man was filled with a furious anger every time his nostrils were assaulted by

the stench. Like all scavengers they were intent upon finding something—anything—which could be converted to their use or sold.

"I found a skate, Daddy," the child said.

"The strap's broke, Davey. It's no good."

"You could make me a scooter out of the wheels if you had some good wood." Davey spun the rusty wheels against the small dirty palm of his hand.

"If I had a million dollars we could breathe clean air," his father said savagely. "Throw the skate away, Davey. It's no good I tell you." The man walked away from the child with awkward angry strides.

Nothing was any good. Nothing had been any good for five years. Nothing was the way he had thought it would be. For himself he could stand the empty womanless house, the failures, the poverty. But not for Davey. He could not stand the bright happiness on Davey's face when he found a broken skate. It wasn't right. A child should be able to expect something of life. Toys should come from stores and not from filthy alleys. Other children had toys. Why not Davey? Why? *Why?*

What was wrong with a world where a man did the best he knew how to do, and tried to be honest, and still had to live in squalor and see his kid's face light up when he found a broken skate? If it was part of God's Plan—like the minister said—God could have it. If it was Democracy, Democracy stunk. If it was living, he was sick of it.

Ruth hadn't been able to stand the poverty and now she was up at Tehatchepi wearing a plain gray dress and learning a trade. When they took her away she had laughed in his face. "At least I'll eat regular," she said. "That's more than you'll do!" Maybe Ruth was right. Maybe honesty didn't pay.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Davey's voice called him back. "Look! I found a pair of boots! I'm Roy Rogers!"

"Those are shoes, son. Boots don't lace."

"But they have high heels. Look!"

The man took the shoes from the child and looked at them curiously. They were almost new; brown and highly polished. They were too small for him and too big for Davey, but they could be exchanged for

others. "You did fine, son," he said. "We'll take them down to The Mart and exchange them for a pair that fit you."

"I guess you found what I wanted, boy."

Davey's father turned and looked up at a big gray man in a policeman's uniform. "We're not stealing anything," he said shortly. "The kid found these in the trash."

The big man sat down on a broken icebox and pushed back his hat. He looked cold and tired. "My name's Masters," he said. "What's yours?"

"Hardy. David Hardy. What's it to you?"

"I don't know." Masters nodded at the shoes. "I'll have to have those. I'm sorry."

The child handed them over reluctantly. "I wanted them for boots," he said.

Masters turned the shoes over in his hand thoughtfully. It was the same pair. It seemed incredible, but there couldn't be two pairs so small and so elegant. "You wouldn't want these, boy," he said, shaking his head. "They wouldn't fit you." The boy and his father had a nice look about them. It hurt Masters to think they were hunting in trash barrels. "In more ways than one," he said, "these wouldn't fit you. You see, there's quite a story connected with these shoes. Three men have owned them in the last week and two of those men are dead now and the third one will be before long."

David's eyes widened. "It'd be mighty unlucky to have those shoes!" he said.

MASTERS smoothed the toe of the shoe with his thumb. "I don't think luck has anything to do with it, sonny. It's just that these shoes—and the men who wore them—have always walked alleys and back streets." He looked beyond the child at the dirty buildings, the sagging supports, the grimy laundry hanging in the sunless court-yards. "The men who wore these shoes never discovered that there are other places to walk." He smiled up at young Hardy. The man had a good face, except for its habitual expression of angry resistance.

"The first man who bought these," Masters said quietly, "was a young punk who wanted things without working for them. He wasn't really bad, but he figured that if

you had *things* you had happiness. One of the things he wanted was a flashy car, so he stole one. What he got wasn't happiness; it was a bullet in his chest.

"After that, an old man named Kasl had the shoes. Kasl was a good man, but he was the sort that couldn't let go of the past. When things went wrong for him, he couldn't pick up the pieces and make a new life for himself. He committed suicide today and when we picked up his body, do you know what we found in his pockets? A bundle of clippings about how good he *used to be*.

"A cheap light-fingered crook stole the shoes from the bridge after Kasl jumped. Gimpy's the kind who thinks the good things in life go to the fellow who can outsmart the others. He finally outsmarted himself and we took him in on an old murder charge.

"Well," he said, "that's the history of these shoes. Thanks for finding them. I'll have your case investigated and see that something is done to help you both." He reached out and ruffled the boy's hair. "You wouldn't want to wear shoes like that, would you, sonny?" He looked up at Hardy. "Your daddy wouldn't want you to have them. He'd rather his boy walked barefoot in the sun than to walk back alleys in these. Isn't that right, Mr. Hardy?"

"I guess so," Hardy said slowly. "I guess if a kid's going to get something good out of life he'd better be taught to look some place besides in alleys." He took his son's hand. "Come on, Davey," he said. "Let's go home and rustle up some supper."

Masters rose from the broken icebox and tucked the brown shoes under his arm. Like everything else, the shoes had good in them as well as evil, and you saw what you were looking for.

Masters was glad that Peterson had left. Peterson would have looked at the shoes and laughed. He would have said, "Three men wore them and they're all dead! Three men with one bullet! I'm getting good, Jim!"

Peterson would never make a good cop until he learned that a police officer used his head and his heart, and kept his gun as a last resort. A good cop knew that, and he wasn't a good cop until he did. ● ● ●



I bent low, hauled
the figure upside

*Steve Morgan had two gorgeous dames on a string. Cold
indifference kept him from one . . . cold murder from the other!*



DEATH LIES DEEP

A Mystery Novelet

By WILLIAM G. BOGART

I

I REMEMBER the day was Friday, along in mid-August, about eight in the evening. Ordinarily by that time there would be a pleasant breeze off the lake, but this night the air was hot and sultry as a strip dancer's face after the fifth encore. I'd started out for her apartment wearing a freshly laundered white linen suit, fresh blue shirt, white and blue striped tie to match, white socks with blue clocks and the blue scar of a stinking Jap's rifle bullet still visible across the corner of my jaw.

"It ain't the heat, it's the humidity," the hack driver said, sighing. "You said Pierson near Michigan is the address, mister?"

"That's what I said," I snapped and mopped some more perspiration off my face.

The cabbie glanced swiftly up in his mirror, shrugged, clammed up and paid attention to his driving. He was thinking this guy is one of them surly ones, and I didn't blame him. I was feeling nasty and I was showing it. And the old scar which extended almost to the corner of the mouth wasn't helping things any.

"Okay, chump, so she waggles her little finger and right away you go racing off to see her," I told myself. Assorted years ago I'd sworn it was the last time I'd ever see Louella Townley. She was tawny blonde and

she was elegant. And full of ambition. She wasn't the babe for me, Steve Morgan, who took things as they came, not caring a hell of a lot if he made a mint of money or not, and having a little fun all along the way. Lou—the small-town girl who made good in raucous, noisy, burly Chicago. And how! And along the way she picked up guys and used them and dropped them like trash littering the wayside.

But not this guy, angel lamb. Steve Morgan got himself out before it was too late. Stevie took his one hundred and ninety pounds of brawn and muscle and went off to the wars to become a hero. A nice big hero with a nice ugly scar across his face, and a deeper scar that didn't show because it was too deep down inside. Lou got herself married to a sackful of money two weeks after you left, remember? Lovely Lou. Sure! So now you're chasing right over there like a hungry dog going to rout up a remembered bone.

I remembered her urgent words, less than an hour ago on the phone. "Please, Steve. I must see you. It's so terribly important." It had been years, and her voice was still husky and low and capable of twisting your stomach into tight knots.

The cab stopped on a nice quiet street on the near North Side before a tall nicely kept apartment building with a doorman who held the door open for you and said in a nice polite voice, "Good evening, sir."

Another polite, uniformed gentleman waited inside the small, correct lobby, a few feet away.

"Whom do you wish to see, sir?" A quiet, impassive, unhurried man.

I told him.

"Are you expected?"

"Yes, I'm expected," I said impatiently and he walked unhurriedly to a house phone unit set in the wall within a little cubicle of the lobby. He spoke politely to someone for a moment, then nodded to me, turned and started through the lobby in his correct, unhurried manner. He stood aside at an elevator, waited until I got inside, then carefully closed the doors. We rode upstairs without having anything further to do with each other.

THE WIDE white hallway was carpeted and quiet, and the door to Lou's apartment was just across from the elevator. It opened as I stepped out. The colored girl standing there was young and had skin the color of pale smooth amber. She had big wide eyes, a cute mouth, and she would never be troubled too much with thinking.

"Right this way, Mr. Morgan," she said and led the way across the foyer into the living room. She wore a black dress and something that was supposed to be a little white apron but looked like a handkerchief.

"Miss Louella will be right out, Mr. Morgan," the maid said. She took my Panama and indicated a chair. Then she went across the big room and disappeared some place.

It was a nice living room. Money had been spent on it. The rug went from wall to wall and cuddled your ankles like soft white snow. Everything else in the room was various shades of pale pink. The lamps were pink and chrome, and there were crystal knickknacks here and there. The drapes at the long casement windows were pink too and so long they covered several feet of rug.

On the pale pink walls hung large photographs of beautiful women, the glamour girl kind found on magazine covers. They were smart, professional photographs that had been taken by someone who knew the business. They were Louella's work, and she knew her business. Her studio worked with some of the biggest ad agencies in the Loop.

I sat back in a wide, deep chair and felt the quiet coolness of the expensive room touch me. The casement windows were tightly closed. Somewhere there came the soft hum of an air-conditioning unit, gentle enough not to disturb one's thoughts. It was a good quiet room in which to think. But I didn't want to think. I got up and strode around the room and then sat down again. The two straight shots of Scotch I'd quickly tossed off before coming here were now water over the dam. I needed a couple more.

"Steve, darling!"

She stood there in the doorway across the room. She must have been there a full instant before she spoke, and there was a smile teasing her red curved lips but not yet in her cool, level gray eyes. She came smoothly

across the deep carpet, both slim hands outstretched with the palms held downward, waiting for me to take them. "Steve, it's been so long!"

"I guess it has," I said inanely and held her cool smooth hands and felt the pain gnawing at my belly.

Her eyes, wide and intelligent, went over me swiftly, then came back to my face. "Years, isn't it, Steve?"

I nodded.

"Sit down," she said quickly. "Let me get you a drink." She turned, as though to call the maid, then moved toward a liquor cabinet. "Do you still like Scotch?"

"When I get it."

"With soda." She turned, smiling.

"You don't forget," I said.

I watched her fix the drinks. She was tall and graceful and softly curved. Her tawny hair was burnt gold on top from summer sunlight. Her smooth features were tanned. She looked healthy and vital. She was wearing something that probably passed for a lounging robe and left nothing to the imagination about her beautiful shoulders and back. It was also cut low in front, and you didn't have to use your imagination there either. Lou had a beautiful body. Her hair swept back from her high forehead, was tied some way at the back, then fell gently to her shoulders.

HANDING me one of the drinks, she sat on the long divan opposite me, curving a foot beneath her. Her deep eyes were bright. "Let me look at you," she said in that husky way. "It's so good to see you again, Steve."

I let her look. I swallowed half the drink, hoping it would take the knots out of my insides.

"Tell me all about you, darling."

I shrugged. "It isn't much."

"Please do. You've never called me, you know."

"I've been pretty busy."

She let that pass. "Tell me about it."

She settled down cozily in the deep cushions and the dress fell away from an outstretched leg. It was a nice leg, beautifully formed right up to the thigh, so why should she worry about showing it. It was something to show. I'd seen it before. It was still

worth a look. So I looked.

I gave her just a sketchy bit of it. "I was lucky." I fingered the scar. "A little yellow man took me out of it a long time ago without mussing me up much."

"It hardly shows," she said. "It wouldn't show at all if you didn't frown."

I finished the drink and wished she'd get on with it. The drink hadn't helped a bit. It was hell sitting there looking at her beautiful body and knowing she had married Dave Townley two weeks after I had gone off to be a hero.

I said, "About your phone call, Lou. . ."

She got up and took my glass and went over to the cabinet to refill it. With her back to me, "You never knew Dave, did you?"

"No."

When she came back across the room the half smile had left her face.

"Of course you knew I married him?"

I nodded. She handed me the glass and I watched her across the top of it as she sat down again. "I suppose that's why you never called?"

I shrugged. "After all. . ." I let it trail off.

She said quickly, "I'll tell you why, Steve! You thought it wouldn't be proper to call a married woman, someone you had gone around with for over two years, and who still thought you were a pretty swell guy. A gal who remembered all the fun we had together."

I grinned. "Well, would it?"

A flush crept into her smooth cheeks. "Oh!" she said, and jumped to her feet and went to the liquor cabinet again. She jerked around and her gray eyes flashed. "I never knew you to rest on formalities."

I finished the drink, staring at her over the rim of the glass. Anger made her eyes sparkle. She came back across the room, almost yanked the empty glass from my hand and returned to the cabinet.

The drop of soda that she added to the two drinks didn't do any good at all. It was like sprinkling a lawn after a cloudburst. This time Lou Townley sat down beside me and her left hand rested lightly on my knee.

"Steve, honey," she said throatily, "you've changed."

"Unh-unh."

"You're hard and you're bitter. You were always a big rough guy. But never like this." She looked at me sideways. "Am I so different? Don't you care any more?" She was close to me, her hand still on my knee, her lithe figure separated from me only by the thinness of the gown.

I stood up, strode to the liquor cabinet and spiked the glass with straight Scotch. I drank the stuff down, banged the heavy glass on the table and came back across the room. I was feeling the liquor and was wondering what hours her husband kept at the office. I was aware of Louella Townley's eyes watching me curiously.

STANDING in front of her, I said harshly, "After all, you're married. Things *are* different, damn it. Why didn't you leave me alone? Why bother calling me at the office? What do you think I am, anyway? I've got a heart and lungs and there's blood in me. I tick inside." I snapped my fingers before her curious, lovely face. "I tell myself it was swell and terrific and all that, but now the lady's married and you forget her. She's private property. Go along and be a private detective, Steve Morgan, and forget all about Lou. She's not for you, chum. Don't make your life miserable."

"Steve!" She was also on her feet now. Very close to me. Hands pressed against my chest and the enticing fragrance of her all mixed up with the burn of the liquor in my guts. "Steve, darling. I'm trying to tell you. Dave and I haven't lived together for a year—"

"Furthermore—" I stopped. I frowned down at her. She was tall, but I still had to look down into her upturned face.

"I'm trying to *tell* you," she said. "It never worked out, Steve. Dave and I have been separated for a year. It's all over."

"I—"

Her hands slid down my chest and went beneath my arms. She held herself tight against me. "You haven't even kissed me," she said softly.

I put my arms over hers. I tilted her head back and my fingers were lost in her tawny hair. Her warm lips came up and for a long

moment there was only the delicate hum of the air-conditioning unit.

Finally she broke away and took a moment getting her breath. "That's better, you big hard guy."

I felt like I was rocking when I let go of her. Maybe I was. It was good Scotch.

"Now, we can talk sense," Lou was saying.

It took me a moment to gather that in. Along with it I detected a speculative sharpness rising in the back of her eyes. "I'd heard, Steve, that you'd gone back to operating your own detective agency. That's why I called you."

She wanted something. I should have known.

"I called you because there's no one else I can turn to, darling. Have you got a cigarette?"

I dug two out of the pack, lit both and passed her one. Unconsciously I had done it the way we used to do in the past when we were out driving. She smiled briefly, remembering, and letting me know that she remembered those nights along some deserted highway far up the North Shore.

I still didn't say anything.

"Dave has disappeared," she announced.

She was sitting down again, but on the edge of the chair. There was tenseness in her.

"You said you haven't seen him in a year."

She shook her head. "I didn't say that. I said we hadn't *lived* together in a year. Naturally, I've seen him. I couldn't afford to let anyone know the way it was, especially business acquaintances. You know how it is when you're dealing with ad agency people. They're touchy as racehorses at the post. None of them guessed that Dave and I—"

"He disappeared?" I said.

She nodded. "A week ago. I've checked everywhere. There's no trace of him at all!"

I grinned a little. "Did he walk out on you, pet?"

Abruptly she was on her feet again. She walked to a tier table and mashed out her cigarette. Her eyes had darkened.

She snapped, "That's one of the things I want to know! If he's walking out, I'm not giving him the opportunity to divorce *me*."

If divorce is what he wants, it's going to be the other way around. Nobody's making a fool out of me!"

I WAS intrigued. I've said Louella Townley was ambitious and now I saw the angle. "Pet," I told her, "I begin to see what you mean. *You* sue for the divorce and maybe you can collect a nice hundred-thousand-dollar settlement. I understand the guy's worth a bucketful of dough. You did all right marrying him. You're a very smart girl, Lou." Then I stood up and started across the room. "But all you need is a two-bit shyster lawyer who specializes in divorce stuff. Cut him in for a good slice and you won't have any trouble." My face was hot and the old scar seemed to be burning like a fiery iron across my jaw. "Now, if you'll just tell me where in hell the maid put my hat—"

"There's something else," Louella said. She said it in such a way that I paused, turning back to look at her. She hadn't moved away from the table, but stood there stiffly, eyes intent on my face, her voice almost a whisper as she spoke.

"It's the real reason I called you," she continued. "Steve, you had a reputation once. You were supposed to be good. You did things in your own way and you didn't go around advertising it to others. I imagine it's still that way. You know your way around this town, and you can do this without anyone finding out. . . at least, yet."

"Do what?" I said.

"Find out if he's dead."

"You mean—"

"I think he is."

I wondered where I had ever picked up the foolish idea I wanted to leave. Lou needed someone.

"I haven't seen him," she explained, "I haven't heard from him. He hasn't been at his office for a week, or up at the lake where the crowd is spending the summer."

"Is that so terribly important? Maybe the guy had something to do."

Slowly she shook her head. "Not Dave. When you're involved in as many deals as he is, you have to be on the job constantly. He never misses spending a part of each day

watching the board at Simpkins Hart, a leading brokerage office on LaSalle Street. The market has been so erratic. And he always has a dozen things on the fire. You never know when someone is going to cut your throat—"

Shock widened her eyes the moment she said the last. She stared at me.

I said, "Did he have any enemies?"

"Naturally! Anyone who collects a fortune in a few years also collects some enemies along the way." Unconsciously her fingers caressed her soft throat. "Steve! You don't think—"

"I didn't say anything."

"No, but you're *thinking*."

"What else?"

She was tense again. "What do you mean?"

"Damn it, Lou," I said impatiently, "get the rest of it off your chest and be done with it. Maybe the guy's dead. You don't love him, you practically said that. So there's something else. What?"

My voice had the same effect as shaking her.

"ALL RIGHT," she said. She gave me a contemplative stare. Apparently she was satisfied with what she found in my eyes, because she went on.

"Suppose he's dead. Suppose I sit back and do nothing but just wait. A thing like that could go on for months, years. I've got to *know*, Steve. Dave's insured for a hundred thousand dollars. I could use that money right now. I need it in the business. . ."

"My God!" I stood up again. I wanted to slap her across the face.

"Wait!" she pleaded quickly. "Please try to look at it my way, Steve. The uncertainty of the thing is driving me frantic. I can't go to the police. If nothing is wrong, everyone would laugh at me. And if he's alive, perhaps we'll learn what he's up to and I can act accordingly."

Lou was shrewd, an ambitious woman who didn't miss any bets. I asked. "What makes you think something might have happened to him?"

Her gray eyes, intent, held on mine. "It was the weekend before last," she offered. "I

was up at the lake. Dave dropped over to the cottage to see me early Saturday evening. A man came there asking to see him. I'd never seen the man before. Dave excused himself and the two of them went out on the porch and talked. There was an argument."

"About what?"

"It seemed to be about gambling. The man left. Dave left, too, shortly after. And . . . I haven't seen him since."

"You say you didn't know the guy?"

She shook her head.

"But I'd know him if I saw him again." She frowned in thought. "He was clean-shaven, but he had the kind of skin that always looks blue where the beard grows. He was thin and dark and he might have been Italian. He was the kind of person you might find around the race track. Not a tout, but a clever, quiet man who had money. There was a streak of gray right in the center of his thick dark hair."

"You'd make a good private eye," I said.

"I notice people."

I smoked a cigarette and was silent for a while. Lou was watching me. I knew a dozen reasons why I shouldn't touch this job with a ten-foot pole. If something did turn up, I was the guy who used to run around with Louella. People would remember. I was going to be caught right in the middle if something *had* happened to Dave Townley.

So I said, "When are you going up to the lake again?"

"Steve!" Her face was bright. "Then you are going to look for him?" She knew damn well I was.

She came over and flung her arms around me and held on to me a moment. Then she looked up and said excitedly, "I'm driving up tonight. It only takes a couple of hours. You can come along with me. . ."

"That *would* tear it," I said. I shook my head. "No, I'll drive up in the morning. I've still got the old Packard. Give me the address and I'll see you up there."

SHE WENT to a desk and wrote something down on a slip of paper. It was the name of a cottage at a spot up in the Chain O' Lakes region in Wisconsin. It wasn't far from Chicago; I'd been there a few times in

the past. This particular spot was patronized by the ad agency people, a clique of them had been going there for years. I'd known some of them. They'd remember me. I'd met most of them through Louella. She had them call me in the time a millionaire client had been found floating around sunning himself in Lake Michigan. Very dead and bloated. He'd been a client of the advertising agency for which Louella did the bulk of her work. Everyone had thought the guy had been murdered. But it was suicide. He'd been on the liquor for a week and one night jumped off the pier beyond the Edgewater Beach Apartments. Few people had known he was a dipsomaniac.

Lou interrupted my jaunt into the past, "I've written the phone number down, too. I'll be there all weekend." You'd think she was starting on a trip to Bermuda. There was too much bright excitement in her eyes. "What time will I see you tomorrow, Steve?"

"You might not see me at all." I shook my head, looking at her. "For a bright girl, pet, you're sometimes dumb as hell. Naturally we can't be seen too much together up there. If something has happened to Dave, people are going to start raising their eyebrows."

Louella waved her hand lightly as though it were the least important thing in the world. "Don't be silly. You just dropped up there for the weekend, that's all. You were looking up old friends. I happened to be one of them. No one need know the *real* reason for your being there at all."

"You're cute," I said. I looked around. The maid had never once appeared again after showing me in. "I'll get in touch with you."

Seeing that I was ready to go, she nodded and called, "Clarabelle." The light-skinned colored girl appeared so quickly she must have been standing in the hallway taking everything in. And she had my Panama.

Taking it from her, I said, "What big ears you have, Grandma."

The maid gave me a curious look. I could tell she was trying to remember where she'd heard those words before. But her brain was too relaxed to be bothered.

So she giggled. "Aren't you funny!" she said.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I'm a panic."

Louella took my arm then and walked with me to the door. She expected to be kissed again. The maid was hovering around somewhere beyond the small foyer. I knew she'd remember just the kind of things you didn't want her to remember.

I said, "Well, good night," and got out of there.

On the way back downtown to my hotel room I picked up a pint of bourbon. A little later, sitting in my room, I cursed the heat and drank some of the stuff. I cursed Dave Townley for leaving his wife. If I had a wife like Louella, I certainly wouldn't leave her. I cursed myself every time I thought how exciting it had been when I held her in my arms. I thought about the man with a gray streak running through his hair and who was more than likely a gambler. Louella's description of him made it sound that way. I played around with an idea. With the sudden impulse to drive up to the lake that very night. Liquor gives you sudden impulses.

I threw a few things in a bag, laid the Police Special and shoulder holster on top, looked around the room once, picked up my bag and left.

It was pleasant driving, once I got away from the city and out along the open Skokie Highway.

II



IT WAS a resort town. It did a nice summer business and a number of people stayed right there throughout the year. Most of them lived out of town at the various lakes scattered hither and yon, but there were a couple of

hotels. The Greenwood looked as good as any. I found a parking garage nearby, left the car there and walked back down the main street. It wasn't too late, not much after eleven. There were people on the streets and the movie house had not yet let out.

The hotel was a big white frame building on the main thoroughfare. Rocking chairs

lined the long veranda. There were green-painted metal fire escapes in front, above the porch.

The lobby was big and cool. A small green neon sign above a doorway across the room read: "Log Cabin Lounge." I heard the tinkle of glasses and people talking. I went around some palm trees and put my bag down before the desk.

"A single room," I told the clerk.

He was a dainty little man with pale eyes and a carnation in his buttonhole.

"You have a reservation, sir?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, sir. We are filled up."

I let him see the five-dollar bill in my hand. His gaze fluttered to it, then back up again, and he looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon. He wanted to protest "Good heavens, sir!" but decided not to. He shook his pretty head again.

He repeated, "I'm sorry."

I walked across the lobby and found the bell captain at his pulpit-like desk. Slipping him the five dollars, I said, "My name is Stephen Morgan. Would you mind seeing if I have a reservation? Single room."

He took the money and said quickly, "Yes, sir." He was an alert young man with wise eyes. Gone only three or four minutes, he returned with a rectangular slip of paper in his hand.

"Here you are, Mr. Morgan. If you'll register, I'll have a boy take you up to your room."

I went back to the desk, handed the dainty little clerk the slip and registered. With a slight smirk I stared at the fellow but I could have saved the effort. His outward shell of impeccability couldn't have been dented with an axe.

The room was good. It faced on the rear, had a large double bed that wouldn't cramp me, and there was a shower. The place was clean and cool.

I watched the bellboy fuss around arranging shades, opening and closing bureau drawers as he stalled for his tip. Flipping him a half-dollar, I asked, "I haven't been up here lately. How are the gambling spots?"

Silently, he looked me over for a moment. He was no bigger than a jockey and looked

like he knew his way around. "Valenti's place is still operating out at the lake," he finally said. "That's just west of town. Only it's called The Oaks. They feature steaks and good dance music. Do you know any one?"

"Not any more."

"I doubt if you'd get in the gambling part," he said. "You have to have a card."

"How do you get a card?"

He didn't say anything.

I grinned. "That puts us right back where we started from."

"I'm sorry," he said, and really meant it.

"If there's anything else. . ."

"Not tonight," I told him. Apparently it was a wide-open town. The people who came to this section had money to throw around. And where there's that kind of dough, you'll find sharp characters who know how to take care of it.

After he left, I went down to the bar.

THE ROOM was long, air-conditioned and fairly well filled. Tables, chairs and bar were supposed to be of a rustic design, but they were veneered and polished so smoothly they would have served as mirrors. The light, peeking from old-fashioned lanterns, was intimate enough to make the lounge a popular gathering place.

Most of the crowd was divided up in pairs, or foursomes. There were good-looking women wearing expensive jewelry. But there was no one I remembered. I sat there at the bar listening to the talk from a table directly behind me—four youngsters with too much money wondering what excitement they could find tonight.

Abruptly I heard one of the lads give a soft whistle.

"Say!" he exclaimed and sounded very pleased.

One of the girls shushed him. "Quiet, you dope! That's Velma Deering."

"I don't know who she is," said the lad, "but she sure is a looker."

"Now, listen—" one of the girls started to complain.

I turned slightly on the stool. The kids were looking toward the front of the room. I saw what they were looking at and I had

to give the lad credit. Velma was something to see.

She was tall and rangy and silvery blonde. She wore a long blue gown and a short blue mink jacket. She probably looked better than she really was, for she knew how to use makeup. Just the same she wasn't anything you'd leave out on the doorstep.

Other patrons glanced at her as she stood there a moment glancing over the room. She seemed to be looking for someone. Then she started down along next to the bar. I turned back to my bourbon.

The bartender had glanced her way, too. He was a short, solid, bald man. His eyes continued to follow the woman, then he was quickly wiping the bar alongside me. The bar didn't need wiping.

"Evening, Miss Deering," he said, smiling.

"Hi, Joe," the voice was soft, smooth.

She had taken the stool beside me. She used a kind of perfume that I had never smelled before, and I liked what I smelled. You wouldn't forget it easily.

"Sherry, Miss Deering?"

"I think so, Joe." A silvery, beaded small purse appeared beside my right arm on the bar. Casually I glanced up into the backbar mirror. Right then she was doing the same thing and our eyes met.

She gave me a casual regard that said nothing. I went on about my drinking—beer, this time. She said to Joe, "Has Tony been in?"

The bartender shook his head. "Haven't seen him all evening."

I gave her a covert glance. She was frowning now. She would be a little older than she appeared, without makeup. Thirty, maybe. She'd been around long enough to know a lot of answers.

"Aren't you working tonight at The Oaks?"

She shook her head.

I was interested now. The Oaks was the place the bellhop had mentioned. The place I might find the man Lou had mentioned with the gray streak in his hair.

"I was thinking of running out there," said Velma Deering. "Tony said he'd be in town tonight. I haven't seen him anyplace."

"Ain't he at the club?"

"No."

She finished the sherry and reached for her purse. Her arm touched mine. I glanced up and our eyes met again. They were quiet green eyes and she had probably used Murine in them. The look still didn't tell me anything.

Again she spoke to the barman. "Joe, would you mind calling me a cab?"

"Sure thing." Putting down his towel he went to the end of the bar and picked up the phone off the handset sitting on the backbar.

He came back shortly and told her, "They can't send a cab for about half an hour. They're busy."

She frowned again. "Tony didn't call here?"

The man shook his head. "I haven't seen him around all day."

"Excuse me," I said.

She turned her silvery blonde head.

"I'm driving out to The Oaks," I said. "I'd be glad to give you a lift."

Again she gave me that quiet regard. Beyond her the bartender was watching me. He shook his head imperceptibly in my direction but she didn't see it.

"Well—" she said as though thinking.

"My car's in the garage just down the street."

Then she decided. "Well, all right."

I stood up. She started to open her purse. "I've got this," I said. So she started ahead of me down the room.

As I handed the bartender his money, he said, "I wouldn't, Mac. That's Tony Valenti's woman."

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't, is all."

I grinned at him. "The lady hasn't objected," I said briefly and followed her down the room.

WE DROVE westward out of town, along tree-shaded streets. The night was pleasantly cool now. The soft glow from the dashboard light softened the slightly sharp lines of her features. She sat there with her knees crossed and she had long, strong, good legs. I offered her a cigarette, struck a match

and held it out cupped in my hand. Her hands touched mine as she steadied the light. She blew a lungful of smoke out slowly and looked across at me.

"I don't recall ever seeing you at The Oaks," she said.

"I've never been there."

"That's what I thought."

It didn't seem to make any difference to her either way. "I take it you work out there?" I said.

She nodded and explained, "Singer. Tonight's my night off."

"Busman's holiday?" I smiled. "Or are you going to play a little roulette?"

As she considered that, I said, "I haven't been up here in several years. I've sort of got out of touch. I thought I'd like to shoot some dice."

"So that explains the offer of the ride," she said.

"I don't know anybody out there. Maybe you could help me out."

"Perhaps."

I let it rest there for a while. The purr of the engine made a pleasant sound in the quiet night. Once I glanced at her face. Her lips were set too grimly for the kind of mouth she had. It could be a nice sultry mouth if she wanted it to be. This guy Tony must have stood her up tonight.

Soon she pointed out a side road. "It's shorter that way."

I followed the narrower road. Next we were skirting the lake. Here and there a cottage showed through the trees. Lights flickered across the water from some of them. Many of the houses had big boathouses two- or three-car garages and at least a dozen rooms. Nice little shacks in which to change to your bathing suit.

A party was going full blast in a rambling white one that we were just passing. A gal was racing across the lawn with a drink in her hand and screaming like a hyena. A gay young blade on rubbery legs was chasing her. From inside the house a recording machine blared a Cugat number. Along with that, it sounded like ninety-nine people were attempting to outshout each other all at once.

"Nothing like a restful vacation in the

country," I said.

Velma Deering's mouth twisted. "The stinking rich. Money buys anything you want up here."

We passed a stretch of deep woods, then the sign appeared like a white ghost out of the night: "The Oaks." It was long and rambling, the size of a ranch. There was a wide parking area in front, between the lake and the main building.

Velma said, "Drive around to the rear."

"I thought we might get something to eat," I suggested. "I drove up from Chicago."

"All right, but let's go around back anyway."

There was a smaller, private parking space on the side of the building. We entered in a carpeted hallway that bisected the club. In the front part were the main dining room and apparently a dance floor, because you could hear the muffled beat of a band. A waiter came out of a doorway and started down the hall, a tray of dishes above his head. He paused, waiting until we passed, and his eyes seemed to raise a little as he saw Velma. Then he frowned slightly.

But she marched past him as though he were a hat rack.

We went through another door and were in a wide foyer now that led back from the main entrance. At the counter of the hat check room, a cigarette girl stood talking to the check girl. The scanty costume she wore revealed a cute figure, small like June Allyson's. She saw Velma Deering, started to say brightly, "Honey, I thought tonight you were—" Then she looked at me and stopped. Her eyes became cautious. I was beginning to feel like a guy with a sign on his back that read: "Leave knives here."

BUT what the hell? Velma was white and able to say no. I began to develop a slow burn. Let somebody say something about us and they'd get their teeth knocked down their throat. I was all tightened up inside. Perhaps a fight would relieve the strain.

We reached the dining room. It was big as a hotel layout, designed to cater to money. I saw champagne in silver ice buckets and

waiters as numerous as customers. A head-waiter holding menus the size of three-sheet posters appeared like magic.

"A table for two, Morris," said the girl.

"I—" The man started to shake his head.

"One of those spares you always keep over there." She motioned ever so slightly with her beautiful head.

I guess he'd been on the verge of telling us that everything was taken. But he bowed briefly and led the way through the room.

My neck burned. Patrons were watching us across the room. You'd think I was escorting a duchess.

Morris held a chair stiffly and properly, motioning to a waiter as he seated Velma. He placed the menus before us.

"What would you like to drink?" I asked. I didn't want to crowd this thing. The gambling rooms probably operated most of the night. Maybe I'd find out something if I waited.

"Martinis would be good before the steaks," she suggested.

"Two martinis—extra dry," I told the waiter. I saw dapper Morris going across the room but he wasn't moving toward the main entrance. He reached a doorway back near the bandstand and glanced back briefly. And he was looking at us. Then he disappeared. Velma had not noticed.

While we were sipping the drinks, the waiter walked over and said, "The steaks will take about forty-five minutes."

The band was playing some good numbers. "Dance?"

She nodded. "All right."

We ran the gauntlet of the room again. The dance floor was at the far end. Lights were dimmer down here and it was kind of private and cozy. A few couples were on the floor.

She was a good dancer. Her movements were smooth and she was tall enough to fit into my arms nicely. We didn't talk much. You could tell she liked the music. She hummed the tune softly to herself. Our cheeks brushed lightly a couple of times.

She bent her silvery head back a little and smiled up at me. "I like big men." Then, as though she had been giving it some thought, "You're kind of nice."

I smiled back. "You're all right yourself, duchess."

Her fingers came up and gently touched the scar on my jaw. It was done the way a child innocently explores something.

"The war?"

"Uh-huh," I murmured.

She moved her head, indicating the band. "Know that number they're playing?"

"What is it?"

"It's called 'I Don't Know Enough About

above her quiet eyes, dark green now in the soft light.

"Know him?"

"He comes here."

"Alone?"

"Not always."

"Any women?"

Silently, she glanced up at me. Then she said, "I thought you weren't looking for—"

"I'm not married," I said. "That part of it is not important to me. There's another



A soft humming sound came from the electric dryer

You'." She held my eyes calmly. "And I don't. You're not a gambler. And you don't look like a guy who hangs around a lake with a fishing pole in his hand. You want something. What is it?"

"I'm looking for somebody."

She smiled a little. "A woman?"

I shook my head. Velma looked like the kind of girl who knew most of the answers. Perhaps she could help me. I also figured she was not one to shoot off her mouth. It was worth a try.

"A man named David Townley," I said.

"Oh, him!" Her penciled eyebrows raised

reason why I want to know. • Does he come with the same woman all the time?"

She shook her head. "Different ones."

"When was he here last?"

She thought a second. "A week ago, maybe."

I HAPPENED to glance toward the bandstand, then, and realized something was going on of which I hadn't been aware. Each musician, while still playing, was watching us as we moved across the floor. It should have been funny. A half-dozen pairs of eyes sliding left to right, right to

left. Like a litter of puppies watching someone slowly wave a tempting bone back and forth in front of them. But it wasn't funny at all. Each man's eyes were concerned.

The music stopped. We returned to the table and finished a second martini. I felt a glow again. A few more and I wouldn't give a damn about the way everyone in the place looked at us.

Stiff, dapper Morris slid up to the table and spoke to Velma. "Tony wants to see you."

Her face set in sudden sharp lines.

"Tony's *here*? I thought—"

Morris nodded and even the nod was stiff. "Upstairs in his office."

Velma's face lost a little color. I was mildly surprised. She didn't look like a girl who frightened easily.

I looked up at the headwaiter and felt the scar burning across my jaw. "So you pussy-footed right upstairs to tell him, huh? How would you like a punch in the mouth?"

"I wouldn't start anything, friend," he said quietly.

"No," Velma pleaded, "don't do anything." Her eyes flashed like green crystal. "I'll see him." She stood up. "He can't push me around like this!"

Grinning now, I got up along with her. "Honey," I assured her, "no one's going to shove you around."

She didn't want me to go, but I held her arm firmly and we passed through the doorway at the back of the long room. We climbed a flight of stairs. It was very quiet. The heavy carpeting muffled steps. They would muffle a shot, too, I thought, or a scream. The office was down at the rear of the hall. It was open a crack and I could hear voices talking quietly.

Velma marched down the hall with her shoulders held straight and her hands clenched. She was angry now.

She hurried into the office and I was right behind her. I remember two or three men were sitting in the room, along with a man leaning back in a heavy swivel chair behind a wide, solid desk.

"Now, listen, Tony," Velma began and her voice was tight. "I looked all over for you. I waited—"

"Shut up," he snapped, not even glancing at her. Instead he looked at me.

Tony Valenti was a clean-shaven, trim lad of about forty with hot dark eyes and blue shadow around his jowls. There was an odd gray streak right through the middle of his thick dark hair. . . .

"**W**HOS your boy friend?" Tony Valenti demanded without taking his sharp eyes off my face.

"I met him at the hotel," Velma said. "When I couldn't find you, he gave me a ride out. He—"

"I said, who is he?"

"I don't know. But he was kind enough to—"

"Get out," Valenti snapped.

"I—"

He repeated coldly, "I said, shove off."

Velma's face was white and frightened again. All the anger that had been pent up in her seemed to wash away when she saw the cold fury in his eyes.

She started toward the door, face frozen.

I turned and said easily, "I'll be with you in a few minutes, duchess." I watched her go out.

Valenti must have got up then and come around the desk swiftly while my back was turned. His fist was moving through the air when I swung back to face him. It was too late to slide away from the blow.

He caught me alongside the jaw with a punch that had good snap behind it. My head jerked around and I was jarred a little. I let him have a left jab right in the face as I turned with the blow.

Blood spurted from his nose and he went backward on his heels. He either tripped or fell and landed on the floor. A kind of animal snarl on his white lips, he started to his feet again. I waited for him, giving him my best leer.

The two men who had been in the chairs against the wall moved in fast. The one with blue-white eyes and a missing tooth. He muttered, "I'll hold him, George." His chest bulged like a barrel.

George looked like an ex-fighter. His face had been flattened. His ears were out of shape. And he had dull, staring eyes and

fists like hams.

George started swinging, and while I was busy with him, his playmate moved in behind and pinioned my arms. He had the strength of a truck horse.

"Hold him, Dusty," George said, while he smashed my jaw right and left.

I tried to catch Dusty, the one behind me, in the shins with my heel. But he knew that one. He had his legs widespread and continued to hold me in a vise.

George kept slugging. His dull eyes were red around the edges. My teeth started to ache.

George said, "You should stay away from Velma, friend. The boss don't like it none." He sounded sad about the entire thing. My face felt sad, too.

He got too close and I kneed him. He fell back, cursing. Tony Valenti was standing to one side watching, patting his nose with an expensive linen handkerchief. There was a glitter in his black eyes.

There was still another man in the room, but he seemed to take no interest in what was going on. He was fat, of medium build. He sat in an armchair that had been partially drawn behind the desk, as though he'd been discussing some business with Valenti before I came in. He wore a heavy, old-fashioned gold watch chain, and attached to one end of it was a small gold penknife. He was quietly and unhurriedly cleaning his fingernails with the blade. He didn't bother to look up.

George didn't like being kicked that way. The redness spread into the whites of his eyes. He came in again. I turned, jerking Dusty half off his feet. I twisted back fast, got my right arm momentarily free of his mighty grasp and brought the elbow back into his belly. Air went out of him like steam from a safety valve. I kept turning neatly and smoothly and brought up an upercut to straighten him out. He crashed into George.

While I was doing that Tony Valenti made his move. He used a sap and brought it down on the back of my hand. I remember he was starting to say, "What's delaying you two punks—"

I don't know what else he said after that.

III



THE day was Saturday, and it was shortly past nine o'clock in the morning. My watch told me the time. The calendar on the wall outside my cell told me the other. My head felt as though it had been worked over thoroughly

with a riveting machine.

I sat up on the hard metal bunk. My clothes looked as if I had slept in them. I had. How many hours? Well, it was sometime around midnight when Tony Valenti had explained to me how he didn't like Velma going out with strange men. After that he must have called the police and given them a tale of woe. He must be the town's leading citizen to get such fine service.

There was an interlude—it came back to me hazily—when I had awakened for a moment some time after Valenti had sapped me. Someone had given me a glass of water. It was George, the dull-eyed bruiser with the bashed-in face. Right after that I had felt like I wanted to lie down and sleep for a month. Now the fuzziness in my brain and the dry taste in my mouth told me the rest. George had slipped me a mild Mickey, to keep me quiet for a few hours. Thoughtful lad, that George. I must look him up later.

"How's it?" said the voice casually.

I took my hand off my head and looked up.

A cop was standing outside the bars. He was hatless, so he was probably the jailer. He grinned.

I said, "Can the condemned have a cup of coffee before they go to the gallows?"

"Sure, pal," he said. "Anything you say."

"Make it black."

"Black's the only way we ever serve it, pal."

He went away.

I sat there trying to figure out why I was in jail. Tony Valenti, of course, was the man Louella had so accurately described. Valenti was, in her opinion, one of the last persons to see her husband before Dave Townley had disappeared. She'd mentioned

an argument about gambling. And Tony Valenti ran a gambling joint that catered to the rich. Velma herself had said that Dave Townley came there often. There must be some connection between Valenti and Dave Townley's disappearance. Yet Valenti had not known that I was connected in any way with Dave Townley. The gambler didn't even know me. Certainly he wouldn't have stuck his neck out by having me thrown in the local jail.

The answer was that he hadn't suspected anything. I was just a mug who had got into his hair, and he had enough local police protection to be nasty with me about it. He was going to make damn sure that little Velma was kept safe.

That was good. The gal didn't even know my name. And no passes had been intended.

The jailer came back with a thick white mug of coffee. He held it in through the bars. I stood up, winced, and walked very carefully over to him. It would have been all right if I could only have walked on deep feathers. Then the shock wouldn't have carried up to my pounding head.

I took the cup, grasped a heavy bar with the other hand and sipped the hot fluid. It was strong enough to eat its way through leather. But that was all right. At least I could taste it. I eyed the jailer as I drank.

"What happened?"

The man shook his head sadly. "Pal, you get yourself involved. You slug a cop. You break our speed laws. You drive while drunk. You disturb the peace. You try assault and battery on a leading citizen—"

"How about spitting on the sidewalk?"

"Now you're just kidding me, pal."

"I was just kidding when I did all those things they charge me with. Or maybe I was walking and driving in my sleep."

"Unh-unh. We got some witnesses."

"So that's the way it is, copper?"

He nodded. "That's the way it is."

"When do I come up for trial?"

I drained the mug and handed it back to him. He said, "Soon's the chief comes down to the office, he'll talk to you."

"Does he bother to come down before lunch?"

"Usually about ten."

I sat down and waited.

IT WAS ten-thirty when the jailer finally took me upstairs. He led the way as far as a heavy oak door on which was lettered neatly in gold: "Wm. B. Botts." Underneath this: "Chief of Police."

"You go right in," he said. Then he closed the door softly behind me and I imagine he stood out there in the hall and waited.

The chief was seated behind a big desk across the big, airy room. Windows were open and there was the movement of warm summer air. This was the city hall building of the resort town, I presumed. Stores, people, kids and numerous parked cars and station wagons were visible outside on the street.

He was a fat man, looking well-fed and well-kept behind the wide desk. He was a little bald.

I was halfway across the big room when I knew I had seen him before, just a few hours ago. The unruffled fellow who had sat in Tony Valenti's office and calmly fixed his fingernails while the boys worked me over.

"Oh, good morning," he said softly.

I nodded.

"Feel better?" His eyes went back to finish some item in the paper, then he laid the paper aside, placing it neatly on a corner of the large desk. He looked at me again. We studied each other without making any fuss about it.

"How much bail do I have to raise?" I asked.

He waved a soft hand, as if such matters were trivial. "It might not be necessary. Tell me, sir, why are you here in town?"

I wondered if he was needling me. Obviously Tony Valenti was paying plenty for protection, and the chief was just a guy who took the orders. I wanted to know where I stood.

I shrugged. "Just picking up old threads," I told him. "I haven't visited here in several years. You know how it is."

He smiled softly. "Of course. You were in the service, were you not, sir?"

So they'd gone through my wallet while I was temporarily out of circulation. I nodded.

"We have some pretty serious charges against you, sir. But I've considered your war record. That photostat of your discharge papers, you know." He studied his fingernails to make certain they needed no further trimming. "We're not going to hold you. We will say that last night's incident was—ah—the result of a little misunderstanding. I suggest, however, that you forget you ever met the young lady or the gentleman who usually escorts her. I think you know what I mean, sir?"

He sat quietly, waiting.

"I can take a hint," I said finally.

"Good. I guess that's all then, sir." He didn't bother to get up. He leaned back, crossed his fat legs and picked up the morning newspaper. "Enjoy our town. Just forget about last night."

I went out of the office thoughtfully. I was puzzled.

The big jailer was still there. He held out my Panama. "How'd it go, pal?" he asked.

"Now you're kidding me," I said.

He grinned. "Your keys are in your car parked out front." He motioned toward the front stairs that led out of the building. "So long, pal," he said.

He came as far as the open front doors and watched me go down the wide steps of the city hall. I glanced back once and he was still standing there. I wondered if he was doing that in order to point me out to someone else who was going to tail me. I didn't see anyone else watching me, but the tail was probably in plain clothes and good at keeping himself inconspicuous.

I drove directly to the hotel parking lot.

A SHOWER and breakfast made me practically well again. The back of my head was sore but there were no cuts. The left side of my jaw felt pushed out of line and was going to be stiff for a while. The white linen suit could do with a pressing, but it would pass. I checked through my pockets to make sure I had everything. Nothing in my wallet had been taken.

Naturally they'd seen the private eye's license. Perhaps that's why Chief Wm. B. Botts had been lenient. Or maybe he also knew I had once been connected with the

D.A.'s office back in the city.

I remained puzzled, however, until I discovered that the slip of paper containing Louella Townley's address was missing from my left pocket, where I had put it last night. Then things began to clear.

Either Tony Valenti or the police chief had found that piece of paper. Either would have informed the other. And one of them wanted to know what my connection was with the wife of Dave Townley.

For some reason I had been let off too easily by the chief of police. Valenti's orders? Possibly. What was their game? What did they want? If I knew the answer to that one, perhaps some of the mystery around Dave Townley's disappearance would be cleared up.

I didn't like it. Something was phony about the whole situation.

The telephone rang. The voice was soft and pleasant, and ordinarily it would have been a nice voice to listen to. But I winced. It was Velma.

"I've got to see you. May I come to your room?"

"You'd better not," I told her quickly. "I think I'm being watched. They'll tail you from the lobby."

"I'm not in the lobby. I'm upstairs in my room. The floor above you."

"Look, duchess—" I started.

But she said, "I'm coming down," and hung up.

I put the latch on the door and it wasn't a minute later that she knocked softly, then walked in. She must have used a stairway, for there'd been no sound of the elevator door opening or closing.

Velma looked just as good in the daylight as she had the night before. Her green eyes were a shade lighter but her face was troubled. She came up close to me and I'd have liked it—if I hadn't of known there were probably a few watching outside.

"You're all right? You're not hurt?"

"Only my feelings, duchess. I spent the night in the bastille."

She nodded quickly. "I heard. They've let you go?"

"The chief practically kissed me goodbye."

She stood there saying nothing. Her red lips worried one another for several seconds. Then she stated tensely, "You've got to get out of town. You mustn't stay here!"

"Why, duchess?"

She shook her blonde head.

"Why?" I waited. I listened for any sound of footsteps outside in the hallway. It was quiet. I don't think anyone had seen her.

"Don't ask me," she blurted. "I—I don't know." She stepped closer and touched my arm with her fingers. "I really don't know. But you've got to leave. Please believe me. It isn't safe for you here any longer!"

I said, "Has it anything to do with David Townley?"

She stood very still, her eyes blank green pools. I added, "What is it about Townley?"

SLOWLY, she moved her head back and forth. She stared at me almost vaguely and murmured, "*He* asked me about Townley last night, after they had taken you into town. They found a piece of paper and address you had in your pocket. He wanted to know if you had asked questions about Townley. I told him no."

"Was that fat slob of a police chief there, too?"

"Yes."

"What else did they ask?"

"That was all."

"Why did he ask it?" I demanded.

"Please. . ." She shook her head again. "I told you I don't know." Her eyes came up and pleaded. "I only know that you're in danger. I can feel it. That's why—"

"Look, pet," I said quietly, "I'm in a dangerous game. I'm used to trouble. So don't fret about me." I took her arms—she was trembling a little—and guided her to a chair. "But you can help me. Tell me about this Dave Townley."

"Up until a week or so ago, he came to the club regularly," she admitted without any hint that she was trying to cover up anything. "He seemed to have plenty of money. He was pretty popular."

"Did he gamble?"

"Yes. Heavily. I heard he lost fifty thousand dollars one night."

"How long ago was that?"

"About two weeks ago." A distant thoughtfulness climbed into her troubled eyes. She stood up stiffly. "I know what you're thinking. I've thought it, too. You don't believe that he—"

I said, "Honey, he's not a lad to shove around." We were both referring to Tony Valenti without mentioning names. "But I don't know. I don't know." I stared out the window.

She was near me again.

"I'm afraid," she said very softly.

I patted her shoulder. She didn't look like a girl who frightened easily, but nevertheless she was afraid. "If anyone asks you, you haven't seen me again. You've forgotten all about me." I led her toward the door. "Now, you'd better get out of here."

She paused near the door. "What are you going to do?"

"That's something I've got to think about, pet. But don't worry about little Steve." I remembered something. "You live right here at the hotel?"

She gave me the room number on the floor above, then she left as sadly as though she'd just paid her respects to the dead.

I thought perhaps Louella could add something to it. I didn't need the address that she'd handed me in Chicago last night. It was filed away in my mind. I got the car and drove out there to the lake again.

HER COTTAGE was on the far side of the lake, and the road around there did not lead past The Oaks, for which I was thankful. Before leaving town I had done some neat driving around back streets until I was positive that I was not being followed. Out here at the lake a shag would have been an easy thing to detect.

It was a lazy, warm day. People drifted about in small boats. Some were fishing. Along the shore, near the cottages, others were swimming. You could hear their voices clearly on the soft morning air. The background of trees acted like a sounding board.

I found Louella's cottage, a green-and-white house guarded by tall stately birches. It looked cool and comfortable. The narrow roadway passed the rear and I parked the

Packard in a short drive that ended at a neat white garage. A pathway led past flower beds to the front of the cottage. The sun filtered down through leaves high overhead and made a splotched quilt of the smooth green lawn. There was a wide screened porch, nicely furnished for easy, gay living. Windows of a large living room and bedroom faced upon it. The windows were wide open, as was the main door to the fairly large house. I stood in the open inside doorway and called, "Anyone here?"

There was no answer. Everything was quiet.

I could still hear an occasional voice from down by the lake. Directly in front of the cottage some more people were in swimming. The water was shallow and they were so far out that I couldn't see who they were. I wondered if Louella was one of them. I was standing there watching when someone moved behind me.

It was the amber-skinned maid. Her eyes looked sleepy.

"Oh," she said. Her teeth shone whitely in her untroubled face. "Miss Louella has been looking for you."

"She around?"

She motioned toward the water. "They're out swimming. Did you have a nice trip up?"

"Lovely," I said.

"Was there something you'd like while you wait for them, Mr. Morgan?"

I shook my head. "I'll just go down there." I dropped my hat on a gay-colored porch swing and started toward the shore.

A path cut down the gentle slope. It led to a long, narrow, wooden stringpiece that ended in a dock and diving platform. A man and woman had just hauled themselves out of the water. They watched a figure swimming some distance from shore. The man turned as he heard my footsteps clattering on the wooden planking. Then he was getting to his feet.

"Steve Morgan!" he said in surprise. He came over and shook hands heartily.

He was a thin, long man with skinny knotted legs and not much chest. But his neat black mustache was in excellent condition. I remembered that his name was

Sheldon Patterson and that he was president of Patterson, Martin and Thomas, one of the big Chicago ad agencies. He'd made money but was still no more than fifty.

"Louella told us you'd phoned her yesterday in town. What are you doing now?"

"Same business."

He turned. The woman coming toward us was his wife. He said brightly, "Elsie, you remember Steve Morgan?"

The woman nodded. "Why, yes! How are you?" She held out a strong, bony hand.

SHE HAD good legs. But that was all. You see women like that. The rest of her was too thin and too lean. She was brown as a nut and her dark, flashing eyes matched. She made up for her figure with something that was in her watchful, questioning eyes:—she liked men. She was younger than her husband.

"Louella told us you might drop by," she said. "Have you a place to stay? There's plenty of room at our place."

"I'm at the hotel," I told her.

"Oh," she said. Nothing changed in her face, yet I thought her remark meant something.

Sheldon Patterson was staring toward the lake. "Look at her, will you!" he said, glancing at me. "Can't she swim, though!"

I followed his eyes. There was a sleek, white-capped head, some distance out from shore, and flashing arms that moved steadily in a lazy crawl. The figure was approaching the edge of the dock. We kept watching.

Then Louella raised her head, saw me, gave a joyous shout. Immediately she increased the pace of the crawl and moved through the calm water with powerful strokes. Soon she was climbing up on the dock. She looked just as good dripping wet as any other way, and that was plenty good. She rushed over to clasp my hands.

"Steve!" she cried. "Let me look at you."

She was gay and excited and uninhibited as a pup. "Doesn't he look wonderful?" she asked the others. "I haven't seen him in ages!"

She did it all up in a nice neat package. She was good indeed. She turned back to

me. "How long are you staying?"

I shrugged. "I just stopped by. I'm looking up some old friends."

"We ought to have a party," said Elsie Patterson.

"I get him first," exclaimed Louella. "We'll see. But first I've got to hear everything he's done since I saw him."

"How about tonight?" Elsie asked me. There was some meaning in her eyes and I tried to figure out what it was.

"Sure, old man," put in her husband. "This calls for a celebration. Tonight it is."

We went back to Louella's house and the maid, Clarabelle, served cocktails. Soon Sheldon Patterson and his wife were leaving. "We'll have to get things started," he explained.

The maid drifted off, leaving a silver cocktail shaker almost full on a coffee table. Louella still wore the white two-piece swim suit. Her stomach between trunks and halter top was flat and hard and brown. Her tawny hair tumbled about her lovely head. She sat down on the chintz-covered divan, unmindful of the wet suit, and looked up at me, her face serious now.

"When did you get here?"

"I drove up last night."

"You should have phoned me."

"It was late."

She made an impatient gesture. "I was up." She nodded toward our empty glasses. "You can pour me another cocktail. Did you find out anything?"

"About Dave?"

"Of course."

"Not yet."

She bit her lip. "I wish there was something I could tell you. But there's nothing. No word from him . . . nothing at all. I can't suggest where to start."

I asked, "Did Dave owe any money? Gambling debts, for instance?"

"No. He had plenty of money." She put down her glass and looked at me quickly. "Oh, I see. That man I described to you. The one who came to see him here that last Saturday. I told you they were arguing. But it couldn't have been about debts. Dave always paid his bills. I didn't even know that man."

"Ever hear of Tony Valenti?"

She shook her head.

I sighed, finished the drink and stood up. "Well, maybe I'd better nose around a bit."

"Aren't you going to stay for lunch, darling?"

"I'd better not." I motioned toward the rear of the house. "It's too bad that maid is here." I let her take that for what it was worth.

Louella said quickly, "Don't worry about Clarabelle. She's wiser than you think."

"Just the same. . . ."

"Please, stay." Her gray eyes took on a lazy, half-sleepy expression. She put her tawny head back against the divan and looked up at me. Her smile was soft. Alluring.

"Look, baby," I tried to explain. "Either I work or I play. It can't be both at the same time. I think it'd better be work."

Her face changed. Her eyes said she wanted to make some acid comment, then she decided not to. "But you'll go to the party tonight, won't you? Elsie and Sheldon are such nice people."

"I suppose we'll have to."

She followed me out to the screened porch. "I think you've already learned something about Dave. I wish you'd tell me, Steve?"

"Maybe I'll have something tonight."

I went around the house to the roadster. Backing out to the lake road, I saw the kitchen curtain move slightly. She should have left Clarabelle back in Chicago.

IV



I WAS drifting along the highway back to town when I realized, after a while, that a car had been following me. I watched it in the rear-view mirror. It snuggled far back, dropping from sight each time I went around a curve. It

must have picked me up when I left the lake road. It trailed me into town.

I drove to the hotel, parked, went directly upstairs. But before I walked down the long hall to my room I stepped to a wide, curtained window at the front of the hall and

peered out. The car that had been following me, a heavy dark sedan, was parked almost across the street close to a fire hydrant. I couldn't make out who was at the wheel. I went downstairs again and crossed the street to the parked car.

It was the two lugs who worked for Valenti. The ex-pug, George, was at the wheel. The sandy-haired one with the blue-white eyes sat beside him. I put my hands on the open window and bent forward to look at them.

George said, "Well, if it isn't Mac. Small world!"

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint you gentlemen," I said.

George's dull eyes looked puzzled. "Come again, Mac?"

"I haven't found him yet. I'll let you know as soon as I do."

Neither man spoke. Each gave me an unblinking stare.

I grinned, flicked my fingers to my hat and went back to the hotel. When I got upstairs and peered out the window again, the car was gone.

In the room I found a yellow telephone slip pushed beneath the door. There was probably a duplicate in the box at the desk, but I hadn't stopped off in the lobby. The writing on the slip said: "Please call Midland 817." The time stamp on the message showed that the call had been received only five minutes ago.

It was a local exchange and I wondered who it was. I gave the switchboard girl the number.

A woman's voice answered. A quick, clear, direct voice, strangely familiar. But for the moment I could not place it.

"You called me," I said.

"Stephen Morgan?"

"Right."

"This is Elsie Patterson."

I frowned. Her voice didn't sound exactly as it had back there on the dock. It held a tense urgency.

"Yes?" I said.

"I've only a moment. Sheldon will be right back." Her words sounded crowded together like a phonograph record that has been speeded up. "You knew Dave Townley,

didn't you?"

"Slightly," I said and wondered what *was* this?

"Then you can help me."

"I don't understand—"

She cut me off. "You're a private detective, aren't you? At least, you were?"

"Yes?"

"Well, then I've got to tell you. It's terribly important. If there was any way I could, I'd run into town now, but it's impossible. I'll see you at the party tonight. I'll manage it, somehow, so that we can be alone for a few moments."

I don't like mysterious women. I said, "Tell me now and we'll both spend a restful afternoon."

"I can't. Sheldon's liable to—" There was a sound as if she had caught her breath, then her voice, very low, finishing in a rush, "He's coming in now. Tonight, then!"

The connection was broken.

I sat there with the phone cradled in my hand and asked myself what it was. Louella wanted to know whether her husband was dead or alive. Tony Valenti knew some of the answers and was standing off, awaiting developments. And now Elsie Patterson, ambitious socialite, was intensely interested in Dave Townley's whereabouts. There was a lad, that Dave, who got around!

I GOT on the telephone again and made some calls to Chicago. The office of internal revenue was closed for the half holiday, but I finally located Bill Hendricks at his home in Oak Park. Bill Hendricks was an old friend. He had several brothers, all of them working in various city jobs down there. One was connected with Chief Storm's office at headquarters. Another was a politician. Still another had some connection with a brokerage house.

I told Bill what I wanted. "If there's any way possible, I'd like to hear before tonight," I said. "I know that's asking a lot, kid."

"Maybe I can do it by phone," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

I gave him my room number and the hotel name and hung up. There was little to do now but wait. Somewhere along the line there must be a clearly defined lead to the

mystery of Dave Townley. I had an idea that perhaps Elsie Patterson was going to supply that lead. Tonight would tell.

I had a sandwich and beer sent up to the room, ordered some newspapers, sent the linen suit down to the valet shop for a press, then stretched out on the bed with the papers. The day was hot. I should have spent the afternoon with Louella out at the lake, where it was cool. My jaw still ached.

At six o'clock that evening the urgent ringing of the telephone woke me up.

It was Bill Hendricks calling from Chicago.

"I got what I could," he said.

"I'm not fussy," I told him. "I've been away too long. I don't know what's been going on."

"Well, I guess nobody else does either. He's managed to keep it pretty quiet."

"Are you talking about Dave Townley?"

"Yeah. . . I reached the right people and I think I've got it straight. The guy's broke, Steve. Flatter than the old bank roll on the day before pay day. Most of it went down the drain in wildcat stocks. The rest, Lord knows where else. He's been putting up a swell front, however."

"Anyone know where he is?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"I'll keep working on it for you, Steve. Can I reach you there over the weekend?"

"Probably. If I'm out, leave word and I'll call back. Thanks a lot, kid."

I hung up. Here was something interesting. So Dave Townley was broke—and even his wife didn't know it. A guy with money is always a target for some kind of pitch. But not a man without it. Paupers usually die of old age.

I kept wondering what Elsie Patterson was going to tell me.

Lou and I started for the Patterson place about nine-thirty that night. I hadn't told her what I'd heard from Chicago that afternoon. We put away a couple of martinis and by the time we climbed into the car there was a brightness in her eyes and a manner about her that gave her the appearance of a teenager on her first date. I hoped no one else would notice it. She glowed like a beacon

atop the Palmolive Building on Michigan Avenue. People might wonder. About us.

But I needn't have worried. They were all whooping it up by the time we arrived.

IT WAS a big place, set on a smooth, velvet-lawned slope and screened by tall trees. Down at the foot of the slope there was a large boathouse and pavilion. When you drove up an efficient fellow relieved you of your car and took it off somewhere to park it. I wondered if he'd be able to find his way back.

The patio had been decorated with gay lanterns and people sat out there, with butlers in short white mess jackets serving martinis and dabs of stuff on small crackers. Somewhere in the background a string orchestra played the right kind of soft music. From inside the sprawling stone house a dance band pounded out jitterbug stuff.

Louella said, "We'd better stop inside first and say hello—though they'll probably never know whether we're here or not."

"They sure whipped this affair together in a hurry."

Louella smiled. "Elsie knows how to spend money."

We met people roaming in and out, and they said hello, and we said hello, and I asked Lou, "Who are they?"

"Lord knows," she said.

But we did bump into Sheldon Patterson, our host. He was maneuvering through the wide front hallway like a sailboat tacking against a stiff wind. He was going to make it to the arched doorway halfway down the hall, but he wasn't going to have much left of the cocktail that he was carrying. He saw us. Or maybe he saw tall, sleek, gorgeous Louella.

He swayed over, bowed and said, "You're lovely," and held out his thin, bony hand. "I'm Sheldon Patterson. I opened the door and some people dropped in. You'll find them around. Did anyone ever tell you that you're lovely?"

Worriedly, Lou watched the drink jiggling in his hand. Then she smiled at him. "Sheldon, you remember Steve?" She turned and gave me some of the smile.

He squinted at me rather bleakly. He

wore good sport clothes and he was not a bad-looking fellow, but his face was too pale. Still he looked better dressed than he had in the swim shorts this morning. He stuck out his hand.

"Glad to know you, old man," he said. I doubt if he knew either of us. He waved vaguely toward some room behind him. "Go have a drink. I'll be back." He winked owlishly. Knowingly. "I've got a prospective client in here, and, boy, is *he* drunk!" He swayed on and disappeared through the archway.

I looked after Sheldon Patterson and said, "He isn't doing so bad himself."

Lou nodded and that sweep of soft hair touched my face. "They got an early start. They had a dinner party earlier." A maid appeared then and relieved Louella of her summer ermine cape and took my hat. We waited until she disappeared again. "Sheldon never drinks during the week. He's smart and he's a real salesman and showman. He probably *has* a prospect here tonight. Sheldon will sign him up, drunk or no!"

"A nice business."

"Probably about a million dollars' worth."

Two huge rooms had been thrown open and cleared for dancing. At one end was the orchestra, at the other a long table set up with appetizers. Two waiters were serving cocktails. I saw Elsie Patterson standing nearby, talking to a group of people. She saw us, broke away, and came over.

"Hi, kids," she exclaimed brightly. She looked smart and trim and expensive. "Steve, I want you to meet these people. I've been telling them about you." She touched my arm. "Come on."

IT WAS an ordeal, and no mistake. Elsie Patterson babbled and I wished to hell I'd never let myself in for a thing like this. I tried to recall faces I had known a few years ago, and recognized none. That was the way it was with this kind of cocktail set. Money attracted them like moths around a flame. The moment someone else showed up with a few more dollars in the bank, they joined the pilgrimage to new haunts.

After a while more guests arrived. Elsie had to excuse herself to meet them. I'd been

trying to escape the darling-I-want-you-to-meet-so-and-so business in order to get Elsie Patterson alone for a second. I wanted to hear the rest about that telephone call. I wanted to hear it now. But too many people were close by.

She did manage, however, to slip in a word just before she started across the room. She spoke swiftly and softly. "I'll signal you the first chance I get. Perhaps we can meet on the patio." And in that brief instant there was a troubled light deep in her eyes.

Somewhere along the way I'd lost Louella. I drifted around, eased out of the house, wandered toward the patio. Through the trees I saw one or two lights bobbing on small boats out on the lake. The air had cooled. On it drifted the bright chatter of sophisticated talk.

I watched well dressed, attractive women trying to impress men, and well dressed, bright-looking lads trying to impress women, and here and there a lady who didn't know how to drink, and others watching her and talking slyly. The little remarks, the knowing glances, the hatreds and jealousies that make people click. All the time I was waiting to hear more about Dave Townley. But an hour went by and I was still muddled.

I'd wandered through a garden, was returning toward a long, wide, open veranda faced with French doors, when I saw Elsie Patterson again. She was talking to a man in a white jacket. They were alone. Everyone else was either inside or around the far side of the house on the patio. Tall shrubs partially cut me off from the two standing there. And the grass had silenced any sound of my approach. Not that I was attempting any Peeping Tom business. It was just that I came upon them unexpectedly. After all, if Elsie Patterson wanted to talk to someone. . .

A pale slice of light from beyond one of the French doors touched their faces as they stood there alone. The man was watching those French doors. I was watching the man and suddenly being very careful that the shrubs screened me.

He was the slender, dapper gentleman of the burning dark eyes and with the odd gray

slash through his black hair.

Tony Valenti—gambler!

You don't get surprises in this business. You get ideas. If you match the right ideas together sometimes you come up with something.

But all you could do with this case was label it *The Disappearance of David Townley*. Was the guy dead or alive? Where was he? The ideas weren't doing me much good unless I found him.

But perhaps the solution was here in a few swift spoken words that were being exchanged. Words murmured too softly to be overheard. I was a dozen yards away. If there was some way I could step closer—

Then it was too late.

Elsie moved toward one of the French doors and entered the house. Valenti waited a moment, then went down three wide steps at the end of the long stone veranda and disappeared toward the patio.

But the big scene was yet to come, I discovered. It was lucky I hesitated a moment before stepping out of the shadows.

Another man was on the long open porch. He'd been standing down there at the far end, his figure blended against a stone column. Now light from one of the doors revealed him clearly.

His thin face was set in harsh, grim lines. And he was no more drunk than I was. Cold fury was in his alert, watchful manner.

He was our host, Sheldon Patterson.

There had been some determined purpose in that little act he'd put on when we met him in the front hall.

V



LOUELLA was looking for me when I reached the patio. She looked warm and excited. She grasped my arm and said, "Buy me a drink, darling. Forgive me for running off like that. Everyone wanted a dance." She gave a squeeze. "Now I'm free. I'm not going to let you out of my sight!"

"Is that a threat? You talk like a wife."

Her eyes changed as she looked at me briefly. "Did you have to say that?"

It could have meant a lot of things. I hoped it meant what I thought it did. I murmured, "Sorry, sweetheart," and steered her toward a table away from the string quartet that was still trying to compete with the talking going on all around. The talk and laughter was winning. It had good hundred-proof on its side.

Louella's brightness returned as quickly as it had left for the moment. She motioned to one of the butlers as we spotted a table. "Right here should be nice—" she started. Then her fingers tightened on my arm. Her quick gray eyes were centered on a table across from us.

I followed her intent glance. It was Tony Valenti.

"That man—" she exclaimed softly, then stopped.

"I know," I said. "He's the one who came to see your husband that Saturday."

"Yes!" She searched my face briefly with her level eyes. "How did you know him?"

"We met. Last night. Would you like to meet the woman with him? I met her, too."

Velma, the silvery blonde singer, was seated with the sleek gambler. I was positive she had seen me. She was attempting to keep Valenti absorbed in conversation. He had not yet looked across the open space of the patio. People moving back and forth cut us partially from view.

Louella seemed to be struggling to overcome an uneasiness. Her firm fingers pressed into my arm. But almost instantly she said, "All right."

We went over.

Tony was good. He was polite. I introduced blonde Velma Deering to Lou and watched the women size each other up in a single glance. Then I introduced Valenti himself. He was as gracious as a secretary of state.

I said, "It's nice seeing you again," and he said, "Thank you," and deep in his dark eyes there was a soft, watchful, catlike smile.

"I believe you know my husband," Louella was saying, and I admired her smooth, cool courage, saying that, watching him for any reaction that might tell her something.

"Yes, I believe I do," he said, and it didn't tell a thing. "He drops in at my place once in a while."

I noticed he wasn't drinking.

We went back to the table, where a butler was waiting. Lou was holding my arm again. She was trembling almost violently. Yet, talking to the gambler, her manner had been casual and outwardly relaxed.

But as she sat down she breathed tensely, "God get me a drink. That man's eyes! He *knows* something, Steve. The way his eyes watch you!"

"Perhaps you're just imagining—"

"No! I could read something in his eyes, Steve. He frightens me."

"All gamblers have fishy eyes."

"This was different!"

I wanted to find Elsie Patterson. I got the opportunity a few moments later. Some people closed in on our table and one of the women said, "*There* you are, Louella! Look, here's someone I want you to meet.

I TOLD Lou I'd see her back there in a few minutes and excused myself, heading quickly toward the house. Luck held out. Elsie was just coming through a doorway and she saw me. There were cushioned swings on the terrace. Some were set apart in shadowy corners. I motioned toward one and she nodded.

"It's the first chance I've had," she said, sitting on the edge of the swing. Her eyes looked wide and too bright in the shadows. Then she blurted without further delay, "It's about Dave Townley!"

"That's why you called me at the hotel?"

"I couldn't go to anyone else. And it was only last night that a little insignificant thing happened that caused me to wonder. Then I saw the whole awful picture as I thought back, and I was positive—"

I touched her hand lightly in order to stop her for a moment. She was shaking. "You're getting excited," I warned. "Try to tell it clearly. Right now you're sort of jumbled up."

"It's so horrible," she gasped softly.

"About Dave, you mean?"

"Yes, about Dave. You see—" She looked at me quickly, eyes full of some horror that

was in her mind. "First, let me explain one thing. Then you'll understand. You see, Dave and I went out a few times together. Sheldon found out. That's why I can't go to him. If I do, he'll know I was with Dave that night, the night—"

I wanted to tell her to get the hell to the point, but I waited patiently. She was excited enough.

"The night—" She started again.

"Yes?"

She seized my arm as though she were going to faint. Her taut voice was a whisper. "Dave—is dead! I *know*!"

Then, so softly that I thought I had only imagined hearing the words, "I think I know who killed Dave Townley."

Just then a group of people burst out of one of the doors from inside the house. They were laughing and apparently intent on a purpose. One of them saw Elsie and immediately swooped down on her.

"We're going to have a swimming marathon!" one exclaimed.

"With cash prizes," a woman added. "The men have formed a pool. They're going to swim down to the Anderson dock, below here. There's prize for women, too." The speaker grabbed Elsie Patterson's arm and pulled her to her feet.

Elsie was an excellent hostess. Instantly she fitted her mood to theirs. She got up laughing and protesting. "I'm not a good enough swimmer. Really."

"Then you can help judge. Some of us are going to sit in boats and hold flashlights, so the swimmers can see the course."

With Elsie in tow, they stormed across the patio looking for more entries. One woman and her partner stared directly at me, and the woman cried, "Hey! Look at *him*. With a build like that he ought to carry off first prize!"

The man said, "All right. He's our entry. I'll put ten on his nose."

There was no eluding them. Everyone was going for the idea as though it was the Kentucky Derby.

I said, "I look cute without trunks."

The fellow who had elected to promote me said, "You don't get off that easy, mister. There's trunks full of shorts upstairs

in Sheldon's bedroom. Come on!"

I glanced across the patio as we started into the house. I didn't see Louella. I wondered if she had been snared into it, too.

Tony Valenti had quietly disappeared. I wondered where he was.

A CARNIVAL atmosphere reigned on the lake front. Those who couldn't swim held flashlights and were getting into rowboats. Someone had even located lanterns. The finish line—the dock of another estate down the lake—was merely a part of the outer rim of blackness that was the night. Someone attempted to indicate the spot with a wave of his arm.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll light the course from the boats."

Bets were being offered and covered. Each team had an entry in the form of a swimmer. Money changed hands as if it were peanuts.

The lad who had elected himself my manager had more good luck than sense. "I've got three hundred on you, Morgan. You win and we split."

Well, I've worked a hell of a lot harder for less. I've even taken a slug for that kind of money, when times were tough.

"I'll try," I promised him.

"Want a drink?"

I shook my head. I saw Louella. She was wearing a swim suit and a robe, and I wondered if she was in this crazy thing, too. Then some people surged around and I lost her again. I also heard a man calling out across the dark water to someone in a rowboat. "Not *that* way, Elsie. Row in closer to shore."

But I couldn't catch Elsie Patterson's answer.

Then the cockeyed race was on. The women went first. Flashlight beams revealed their moving legs and arms, but soon they were lost out there in the darkness. Out of the gloom the thin white pencils of light jerked here and there like tiny beacons gone haywire. Laughter floated across the dark water. In the night there was confusion and shouting and voices trying to call direction.

After a while you could hear yells from up the lake, and apparently the women's

race was over. Then the men were under way. I was in the water, thinking, what a hell of a thing to be doing at midnight!

There were six of us. We soon were separated, because the rowboats now spread out all over half the damned lake. Some guy was standing up in flat scow and waving a bottle. He was high as the Empire State building. "Right this way, gents," he called out. "Stop off at the nineteenth hole bar for a quick one."

I ignored the boats and the bobbing lanterns and flashlights. Before plunging into the water I'd taken a line on the goal down there in the blackness. I hoped I was heading straight for it.

That's how I won the screwy race. I wasn't any better than anyone else. Just soberer. Two men who had been posted at the goal hauled me up on the stringpiece. The women swimmers had disappeared toward the Patterson place to dress.

Another contestant arrived behind me, but the others were all off course. We held flashlights and tried to guide them. You could hear the voices trying to shout directions from the boats.

Then all you could hear was the woman's shrill, keening, terrified scream. It came out of the night like a slash of lightning.

EVERY other sound stopped, as everyone heard that awful cry and paused to listen. In the stark silence it came again.

"My God!" breathed one of the fellows on the narrow dock beside me.

He stared into the night and directed the flashlight beam out into the darkness. The woman's cry had come from close by.

A boat leaped into the white cone of light. It was tilted crazily as a woman, on hands and knees, bent over the gunwale. She seemed to be tugging at something in the water. She was trying vainly to haul it into the boat.

"Oh, my God!" the man beside me repeated.

I was diving off the dock while he was still saying it.

No more than two minutes were required to reach the boat. The woman kneeling in the bottom, tugging at the figure in the water,

was sobbing and half hysterical. I'd met her, but I didn't remember her name. I went up over the stern of the rowboat, so that it wouldn't tilt completely over, dived toward the woman and pushed her aside.

"Get your weight on the other side so we won't tip over!" I snapped, trying to jar her into clear thinking. I held a fistful of hair as she released the figure in the water. While she balanced the rocky boat, I bent low over the gunwale and hauled the figure overside.

It was Elsie Patterson. And I didn't like the looks of her. Not one bit. Her eyes were closed.

Being slender, she was fairly easy to handle, though no one who is limp, dead weight is easy to manage. I started working over her while the other woman tried desperately to handle the oars. She was so excited she hardly knew what she was doing.

Almost instantly other boats were arriving. A man piled in with us and took over the oars. "Get to the dock," I ordered. "Hurry!"

He didn't need urging.

Blankets were spread out on the dock by the time we arrived there, moments later. Elsie Patterson hadn't yet stirred.

I got what water I could out of her, laid her flat on her stomach, turned her face so that she could breathe, and knelt over her and started artificial respiration.

I still didn't like the looks of her and yelled up at someone standing over us, "Can we get a pulmotor?"

"The police, in town, have equipment."

"Call them!"

But long before they arrived, I knew a pulmotor wasn't going to do any good at all.

Elsie Patterson was dead.

She had drowned, there seemed no doubt about that. And long before the local coroner arrived, and allowed the body to be moved up to the house where he made a more complete examination, I had noticed something about Elsie Patterson's too-thin figure.

I was positive she had been murdered.

"A horrible accident," Chief of Police Wm. B. Botts was saying with the right note of sympathy.

Yes, he was there, giving me that half cynical look he had used at headquarters. I was dressed now. With him were a couple of cops from town. They didn't look very smart.

"Accident, hell!" I said.

WE WERE gathered in the big library of the Patterson home. Elsie lay on a leather divan, a blanket covering her, even her face. There were maybe a dozen people in the room. The others had been shut off by the closed doors.

They were watching me intently. Lovely Louella was in the group. I'd learned she hadn't been one of the contestants in the women's race, though she wore a suit and bathing cap. She'd been in one of the rowboats, serving as a guide for the swimmers. Now she stared at me and gasped:

"Steve! You don't mean that?"

I nodded.

Chief Botts pushed his fat body in front of me. "You'd better explain that remark, sir."

"She wasn't a very good swimmer," I said. "I saw her this morning."

"But she wasn't swimming tonight, not in that contest," Botts said softly in a manner he probably thought was suave. "We've already been told that. She probably got excited and fell out of the boat. She was alone out there—"

"Don't be a fool," I said. "She could have been held under water. It only takes a part of a minute to drown, my friend."

The coroner—a stocky, quiet man with glasses—had been listening. Now he put in, "Naturally, I leave nothing to chance. We think of those things, too, my good man. But there are no marks on her throat showing there was any kind of struggle."

"But there are marks on her ankles," I said grimly.

The coroner nodded. "Marks caused by the straps of her sandals. I saw them."

"Were they caused by that?" I asked.

No one spoke.

One man had not entered the conversation. He stood apart from us, stiff, his face thin and gray and strained. He, too, wore swim trunks over which he had thrown a robe.

He was thin as a matchstick. It was Elsie's husband, Sheldon Patterson.

Now he spoke for the first time. His voice almost cracked, and he controlled it with a mighty effort.

"Just what do you mean, Morgan?"

"I mean," I said harshly, "someone held your wife under water by the ankles until she drowned. They tilted the boat, then *pulled* her under."

He looked at me out of eyes that seemed frozen.

I returned the look. "By the way, Patterson," I said, "where were you all the time?"

He looked as if he wanted to hit me. But finally he said, "I was right in the boat with her. She was perfectly all right when I left her—"

"When you left her?"

His eyes glittered. "Tommy Engles called me over to his boat for a drink." I remembered the drunk who had been waving the bottle at the start of the men's race. "I swam over there. I was afraid something would happen to him. I rowed him in to the dock. We had just gotten there when—when Amy screamed."

I said meaningfully, "I suppose Tommy Engles can verify that you were with him all the time?"

He almost sneered. "Tommy Engles passed out and you damn well know it. He won't remember a thing."

I was sticking my neck out from here to there. Chief of Police Botts knew it, and was wondering why. But I was remembering Elsie Patterson's swiftly spoken words: "I think I know who killed Dave Townley." And there'd been her secret rendezvous with the gambler, Tony Valenti, and her husband's expression as he watched them.

Someone knew that Elsie Patterson had suspected. Because of that Elsie was dead. It *had* to be murder!

IT WENT on for another hour, but we got no place. It was Sheldon Patterson who said quietly, "Chief, do you mind—" He looked ill. He was nodding toward the closed doors.

Fat, officious Botts said, "Everybody be around for the inquest tomorrow." He swung

and gave me his soft smile. "That includes you, sir."

Then Sheldon Patterson was leaving the room, murmuring shakily, "There are so many things to do. I'll have to make arrangements. . ." He didn't look at the covered figure on the leather divan.

I got hold of Louella and we got out of there. There was still some questioning going on as the police moved among the other guests. Then they were leaving one by one. What had been a gay evening had swiftly changed into a horrible affair of people speaking in hushed voices and moving on tiptoe.

I asked Lou, "What happened to Tony Valenti?"

"The gambler?"

"Yes."

"He left with that singer. The one called Velma."

"Before it happened?"

"I'm pretty sure. But it was difficult to keep track of everybody."

"I'll take you home," I said.

We were going down the steps now and Lou gave me a swift, thoughtful look. "Then where are you going?"

"I didn't say—"

"No, but you're thinking of something."

I didn't answer until we began looking for the fellow who had parked the cars. It took about five minutes for him to bring it around. Just as we were climbing into the Packard, another car came along the drive. It had appeared from a garage at the rear of the place. I paused, one foot on the running board, watching.

Sheldon Patterson was behind the wheel of the car. Alone. I got a glimpse of his face. His features were set in stony, purposeful lines.

"I had an idea of this," I said musingly. "He certainly got dressed in a hurry. . ."

"What do you mean, Steve?"

"He's heading for trouble. He's going to see Tony Valenti."

Louella gasped as she held on to my arm tight. "*That* man again?"

"That man again," I said, and climbed behind the wheel.

Lou wanted to ask more questions. But I

ignored them. "You ought to have something around you," I said. "Where are your clothes?"

She motioned toward the Patterson house, then shuddered a little. Her tanned, bare thighs gleamed in the dashboard glow. "I don't want to go back in there tonight," she pointed out. "Run me home. I'll change."

"You'll *stay* home, pet," I said.

"Take me with you?"

"Unh-unh."

A few moments later we pulled up in her driveway behind the white cottage. The night was very quiet. It must have been about two o'clock. Louella looked like a bronzed, ivory-smooth goddess in the tight swim cap. She leaned close to a moment. "Please be careful, darling. If anything ever happened to you—"

There was a time to be romantic, but this wasn't it. I was thinking of Sheldon Patterson.

"Scram," I ordered.

Her eyes shone in the night light. "Don't be so damned cold!" she snapped.

"Baby," I told her, "every time I think of that poor Elsie. . ." I shook my head, helped her out of the car, and kissed her because that's what she wanted. I did it thoroughly, because it might be a long time before I kissed her again. I yanked off the tight-fitting bathing cap and let her tawny hair fall down. I buried my hands in her hair and pulled her head toward me again and kissed her so hard my teeth hurt.

"Whew!" she gasped, staring at me.

I drove away still feeling as though someone were running ice water down my back, drop by drop. I sent the roadster roaring around the lake, because I had to catch Sheldon Patterson.

VI



PATTERSON must have reached Tony Valenti's upstairs office at The Oaks only moments ahead of me. He was in the room when I came along the carpeted hallway, and there were only the two of them. For once,

Valenti's strong-arm lads were not around. Patterson must have caught the gambler flat-footed. Thin and gray-faced, Patterson held an automatic in his fist, standing in front of Valenti's desk, and he was talking. I came up to the doorway and paused. They had not heard me. I didn't want to startle Patterson into action. A guy not used to handling guns can do a lot of damage on short notice.

Patterson was saying, "You'll damn well tell me what was going on, Valenti! Don't think I didn't see you talking to my wife on the veranda tonight. I knew she'd been going out with some man."

Valenti's voice was tight but calm. "You're a blind fool, Patterson. . ."

"What did you have on Elsie? Why did she withdraw twenty-five thousand dollars from her personal bank account a few weeks ago?"

Valenti was on his feet, his face hard and his black eyes blazing. He was taking an awful chance on getting drilled. But I didn't think Patterson would shoot just yet. He had more to say—and I wanted to hear it.

But it was the gambler who said, "She drew that money out of the bank to help Dave Townley. *He* was the man she was chasing around with, you blind sap. Townley was broke. He came here one night and made a desperate attempt to clean the house in order to get some money. Instead, he lost fifty thousand." Valenti yanked a slip of paper from his pocket and threw it on the desk. "Read it! There's his I.O.U."

For a little while the office was deathly silent. I saw Patterson's trim head bend slightly to glance at the note, while he kept the automatic leveled in his fist.

"Then why were you talking to her so secretly tonight?" The tone of Patterson's voice had changed. There was doubt now.

"I'll tell you why. Your wife suspected the truth—that Dave Townley was dead. I'd had somewhat the same idea. That's why I was playing it safe. A man owes me fifty grand and he disappears. Suppose he's found murdered? Someone learns that I hold that I.O.U. and I'm the fall guy for the murder!" He gave a short, brittle laugh. "That private dick shows up here and he's looking for the

guy, too. So I figure I'll let *him* do the looking—"

"What detective?" demanded Patterson.

"Morgan, the fellow who was at your house tonight. What do you think Dave Townley's wife has him up here for? Morgan's supposed to be good. He's a tough article when he wants to be."

Sheldon Patterson thought a moment. Then he blurted, "You talk too easily, Valenti." The doubtful tone had left his voice. It was accusing again. "If Townley's dead, then you killed him. And then you were afraid Elsie would talk, so you—"

It was time for me to move. Patterson's voice started to tremble as he mentioned his wife's name. His fingers were white where they held the gun. I stepped quickly inside the room.

"Patterson," I said softly, not to startle him too much.

He swung and came around with the gun not a foot away from me, which was exactly where I wanted it. If the gun is held too far away from you, the Judo trick won't work.

My right hand slashed down, caught the barrel of the automatic and carried it downward and to the left. In the same fast movement my left hand seized Patterson's gun hand just at the wrist in a crisscross impact. The weapon twisted easily from his hand. It's a trick of leverage and timing. Even a woman could do it with practice.

I DROPPED the automatic into my pocket and said, "Everything he's told you, Patterson, is true. You're forgetting one thing. Valenti, here, wasn't even at your place to-night when Elsie was—when it happened. He'd left."

Valenti looked at me and nodded. "Thanks," he said, and he really meant it.

Patterson sat down. His thin shoulders drooped. He must have thought a hell of a lot of her.

I turned to Valenti again. "What else did Mrs. Patterson tell you?"

"She had an idea about something," Valenti explained. "She had an idea Dave Townley's body was right out here in the lake. I don't know what it was that started her thinking about it. She was going to ex-

plain in more detail later."

He was telling the truth, no doubt about that. I recalled Elsie's own words to me.

He added: "I thought it was funny, if he was in the lake, that the body had not been found. Then I remembered the lake overflows down here at this end near a small dam. It's stream-fed at the other end. That creates a current that would carry a body this way. I've got a couple of the boys out there looking now, just on chance."

"Could Townley swim?"

Valenti slowly shook his head. "That's something else. I just found out a little while ago that he couldn't."

Suddenly I saw a need for hurry. I said, "Let's see if they've found anything."

Valenti nodded.

We took Patterson with us. He was in a bad way. A guy in that condition is liable to do himself no good. Keeping him occupied was the best thing.

We drove down to the end of the lake, not far from The Oaks. Valenti used his own sedan. The dam was a concrete wall not more than fifty yards across, half concealed by old trees and brush that grew wildly at this part of the lake.

Dusty, the barrel-chested fellow with the blue-white eyes, was there, and the ex-pug, George. They were smeared with mud and rubble that had collected in the heavily barred gate just below water level of the dam.

David Townley was there, too. . . .

He wasn't very nice to look at. They'd pulled him up with iron grappling hooks. He must have been caught down against the gate for a week or so, below the water level. I wouldn't have known him, but Valenti and Patterson made the identification positive.

A moment later I found myself staring at the palms of my hands. I held them up, looking at them, and felt that drip of ice water along my spine again. Valenti glanced at me curiously as I rubbed my hands down across my hips, as though to rid them of the coldness that I felt there.

I drew Valenti to one side and told him where I was going. I also asked him some questions. His dark eyes showed astonishment. It was the first time his poker face

had ever revealed his feelings.

"Call fatso—the police chief," I said. "Have him meet you there. Give me ten minutes or so alone over there. I want to find out something."

"You take a hell of a chance," warned Tony Valenti.

"We'll see."

I left, alone. I figured not more than twenty or maybe twenty-five minutes had elapsed since I had started for the gambler's office. That wasn't too long.

A few moments later I left the roadster parked along the curving road. I walked the rest of the way. Crickets chattered at me as I moved silently through the night.

THERE was a light on upstairs, in the bedroom. Downstairs was in total darkness. I went up the steps and across the outside porch and found the house wide open. No one ever locks doors at a lake colony. I stood just inside the living room and waited until my eyes adjusted to the inside shadows. Then I found the stairs and climbed them like a tom-cat on the prowl.

Light came from the open bedroom doorway. There was a soft humming sound, like an electric fan running in the night. I stepped quietly to that doorway.

She sat on a bench before a vanity mirror. She wore some kind of negligee, and there was no doubt about it that she was an elegant kind of creature.

Thick tawny hair tumbled about her shoulders. The soft humming sound came from the electric dryer that she held in her hand. She was just about through. She had not heard me.

I said, "Louella?"

She turned with a startled jerk. A peculiar intensity leaped into her gray eyes.

"I discovered your hair was wet when I kissed you just a short while ago," I said. "Yet you weren't swimming in that race tonight. You were supposed to be sitting in one of the rowboats. You never mentioned being in the water. While the excitement was going on, that lovely body of yours dried off. But your hair didn't. That's why you kept on the rubber cap, isn't it?"

She didn't answer. Caution was in her

eyes. There was a brief silence.

"We've found him," I said. "He couldn't swim, could he? And Elsie Patterson was a weak swimmer. You drowned them both by pulling them under. You're an excellent swimmer, Lou."

She came stiffly to her feet, putting on an expression of clever, amazed horror.

"Steve!" she gasped.

"Cut it, Lou," I said bitterly. "I've learned too much. Dave was broke. You knew that, though you pretended not to. And what you want more than anything else in the world is money. You live for it. The only way you could bleed more out of him was to have him dead—he had plenty of insurance."

I dragged the words out and felt cold as ice while I was doing it. "You planned bringing me up here, and then cleverly steering me toward Tony Valenti, all the time pretending you didn't even know the man. But you did. He just told me. He told me something else. He phoned you about David's I.O.U."

I came closer to her. I had to hold myself in, for I had a terrible desire to hit her. "Tonight at Patterson's house you pretended shock when you saw Valenti. There was that man you had told me about, you said. But you knew him all along."

"Stop it!" rasped Louella.

"Stop, hell!" I snapped. "You killed Elsie Patterson tonight because you were terrified when you saw Valenti at the party. You knew she had been out with Dave, your husband. You knew Elsie's husband—or Valenti—was in a good spot to take the rap. You knew about the I.O.U. and Valenti, and you steered suspicion toward him. But you couldn't find Dave's body. It must be someone else. Somehow you would have led someone to that discovery."

Only once did she show fear. Her tongue moved swiftly over her red lips, then her mouth set in a thin line. A sneer wiped all the beauty from her face.

"Prove it!" she flung at me.

I came up to her and seized her by her lovely shoulders. My hands cut into her smooth flesh. "I'm going to beat it out of you," I said very softly. "I'm going to slap that face of yours until it's pulp—that beau-

tiful, treacherous face of yours. You're not going to be pretty to look at when I'm finished."

She screamed. I held onto her. I shook her so hard her negligee fell off one shoulder. The maid, Clarabelle, heard the racket and came rushing in from another room. She pounded helpless fists on my back and screamed.

Lou was terrified. To mar that smooth beauty of hers was far worse than death. She kept screaming in ungodly terror.

And I hadn't done a thing except to hold and shake her a little. It was the fear that was in her mind that made her crack.

"All right," she screamed. "I killed them. I'll tell you everything. Only don't hit me. Please!"

During all the bedlam, Valenti and fat Chief Botts and the others must have arrived. I was so intent I never heard them. But they heard her words, and that was the finale. They were right there in the upstairs hall.

IT WAS the next afternoon before I could be alone again. There had been details to clean up. We learned Lou had even consulted an insurance agent preparatory to filing a claim for Dave's insurance. She'd told them she suspected foul play, and just wanted to know where she stood and how much would be coming if something had happened to her husband.

Going to them first was another one of her clever moves. What murderer would ever consult an insurance company *before* the corpse was found? She had cool nerve.

The day was Sunday, and I'd been up for hours, and what I needed more than anything else before I started back to Chicago

was a drink. The hotel bar didn't open until one in the afternoon.

I went down there after checking out of the room, parked my bag near the bar and climbed on the stool. "Some bourbon," I told stocky, bald Joe, the same fellow who had been there when I picked up Velma.

"I guess it's tough," he said seriously as he set a jigger glass and bottle before me. "I've been hearing about it."

"Yeah," I said. "A lousy business."

He saw I didn't want to talk so he walked away and left me alone. The bar was deserted.

Then someone came in. I turned. She was nice. She had silvery blonde hair and deep green eyes. A smooth number you'd like to take places.

She sat down on the stool beside me. "I just heard you were driving into Chicago," Velma said. "I thought I might ride along. I have a few days off. I want to see my agent about the fall season, when things close here."

Joe looked at me like he had the other night, but he didn't have to worry.

I said to Velma, "Honey, right now's a bad time. I wish you hadn't asked me." I patted her smooth shoulder gently. "Some other time when you're in Chicago, look me up in the phone book and drop around. Maybe things'll be different. I don't know. I don't know."

I finished a drink, put a bill on the bar and picked up my bag. Velma was looking at me. She wasn't looking at me like any other woman would in a moment like that. I think she understood.

I would have been willing to bet she'd call me some day. And I'd probably be glad when she did.



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I gripped her wrists, sick with torment as I stared at her

ALIVE BY MISTAKE

By AL STORM

The dope peddlers figured that once a man's dead he can't suffer any more—and he certainly can't argue!

JUST inside the doorway of Charlie's Grill I stopped long enough to shake some of the rain from my shoulders and to turn down my coat collar. Al Winneger was hunched over a coffee cup at the near end of the counter. And sight of him sent my

glance lifting toward the neon-faced clock inset above the backbar mirror. It was late. Plenty late.

I moved toward him, shaking my head and making tsk-tsk noises to snag his attention. But he didn't let on. Not even when I slid

astraddle the stool beside him.

"Bess visiting her mother, Al, that you're on the town?"

The sour-sweet smell of alcohol hit my nostrils. I saw then that he was loaded: Al, the guy who limited himself to two bottles of beer and began yawning at 9:30.

He was slumped forward, elbows braced, fists knotted and propped against his forehead.

"Al! What in hell's—"

The light reflected from a thin stream of moisture that ebbed from the corners of his tightly closed eyes. I swung about, looking along the counter. I don't know what I expected to see. Or whom. Charlie stood some dozen feet away, watching. He lifted his shoulders in a questioning shrug and shook his head when I looked at him. Sympathy made the mournfulness of his sad brown eyes and heavy dewlap jowls even more pronounced. When he shook his head a second time I turned back to Al.

"Look, Al," I murmured. "Try pouring this coffee into you. You'll feel bet—"

He opened his eyes, moving his head enough to catch my glance; and I reached out impulsively to grip his shoulder. All the torments of hell lay naked in those bleared blue eyes. All the anguish fate ever conjured to bludgeon man. Drunk he was, drunk as a goat; and yet somewhere deep a cold raw sore wouldn't seal over, somewhere within was a hurting that alcohol could not numb.

"You know me, Al. Let me—"

"I'll kill 'em, Bert," he whispered, and there was no alcohol raggedness in his voice. "So help me, I'll kill 'em!"

"Sure," I said. "Just drink this coffee and we'll—"

"They—they got Sheila."

That stopped me dead. Sheila was Al's teen-age kid, a pert little blonde with a stubby nose and— Al's eyes flooded even while I stared at him, a tear spilling over to trace unnoticed down his jaw.

"Who got her, Al? What's happened? For God's sake, man—"

"You been reading the papers. You know. That—that slimy narcotic-sex stuff that's been working into our high schools. And I thought only—"

I WANTED to see it plainer, but the question wouldn't come out. Yet I didn't need it answered any plainer. A sick realization spread under my belt.

"Bess?"

"In bed, sick. Terry is with her now." He stared at me, not seeing me—seeing instead a something that pulled his eyes and his mouth into a grimace of savagery.

"I'll get 'em, Bert!" he half yelled. "Sheila told me—"

I gripped his shoulder, squeezing hard. "Easy, Al. Don't go wild now. Easy. . . drink this coffee and we'll go."

Al subsided with a mumble of threats and I nudged the coffee mug nearer his hand. Charlie's Grill had grown quiet with that hushed vigilance that tells of watchfulness, of listening.

Charlie, himself, moved toward us along the counter, his furrowed face drooping and sad as that of some aged and mistreated Missouri hound dog.

"I don't want to intrude, Mr. Winneger," he said quietly. "But if you want to talk—"

"I'll take him home, Charlie," I cut in. "My car is just up the street a ways."

Charlie nodded, staring at the agony imprinted on Al's flushed countenance. "Is—is somebody sick or something?" he put to me. I shrugged, getting to my feet and half lifting Al from the stool.

"He's had a bad one, Charlie," I explained across my shoulder. "I'll tell you about it later."

Al's legs wouldn't track, and I gripped his forearm, walking close to support all the weight I could manage. Charlie left his post behind the counter to open the door for us.

"Thanks, Charlie," I said. "I'll get him home all right now." I half turned, nodding my thanks.

And then I saw old Chuck Wingate watching from a rear booth. His shave was too old. The knot of his rope-like tie was askew. But it was Chuck, though he dropped back out of sight the moment my glance touched him.

"Ask Chuck if he'll come help me with Al," I told Charlie.

"Chuck? Chuck Wingate! You know him?"

I explained that Chuck odd-jobbed for me

upon occasion. Charlie turned back inside, leaving the door ajar.

The rain was cold, a fine slanting spray that began to make Al restless. He mumbled and tried pulling away. I talked to him. Then Charlie came to the door and said that Chuck Wingate was gone, probably had left by the alley door. Charlie was sorry.

It didn't matter. Al was fast slipping into the sick side of his drunk. The crest was past. I half led, half-carried him along the deserted street to where my old coupe was parked. He slumped in the seat and sat staring dumbly at the rain-fogged windshield.

I drove carefully, saying nothing. What lay ahead I dreaded. Seeing Bess, Al's wife. Seeing Terry, Bess's sister. Somehow the inadequacy of mere sympathy, my damnable inability to do anything more than offer condolence worked into anger that fumed and smouldered and had no vent.

THE inhuman monsters, the damned rotten filth that would pollute a high school with reefers and goof balls and snift sugar! I'd read about it, sure. Who hadn't? The papers were full of it. Investigations, disclosures, sensationalism. And talk of a lid being clamped on the town.

"I'll kill 'em—" Al mumbled suddenly.

"And I'll help you!" I snarled. "With my own bare hands, if I get the chance!"

But what chance did I have? A hack writer, new to the town, acquainted with maybe twenty people of the three-quarter million who made up the place. Silence clamped down and we rode that way, each gnawing at his own thoughts, until I swung up into the cement drive that sided Al's bungalow.

Terry came to the door, a slimmer, taller replica of Bess. Her eyes were swollen. I nodded at the mute question flung me, following as she led the way through the house to the screened sleeping porch in the rear. Al was all but out. I undressed him, shoving him into bed without bothering with pajamas, and returned to the living room where Terry stood waiting.

"He—he'll be all right?"

"He'll be all right," I said. "At least physically."

"Bert, I—" She was in my arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

I held her close, smelling the faint fragrance of her hair, feeling the emotion that swelled and choked until I wondered why man worshipped a God who allowed him to be so grieved.

"Easy, pet," I murmured. "It's a rotten deal, but things will be better. Sheila isn't dead. She'll live through this, and—"

Terry drew back, dabbing at her eyes. I kissed her, but it was wasted. What she felt for me was locked away now, blocked off by the hurt and anguish.

"They'll get away with it, won't they, Bert? They'll lie quiet until the hubbub blows over and then it'll break out again?"

I shook my head. But it was a lie, and she knew it.

"And other kids, other girls like Sheila, kids who trust and believe—kids who want thrills, or who are innocently curious—"

"The cops are working on it," I said. "They'll put the clamp on—"

Terry jerked impatiently. "On the peddlers! The street hucksters! The law will get them, maybe. But the big boys will go free. And they'll keep—"

I tried to take her in my arms. "Try and forget it, pet. Don't brood."

She stepped away from me, face paling and stiffening with emotion. "Forget it! Do you think Bess can ever forget? Or Al? Do you think Sheila will ever forget?"

I fumbled for a cigarette, watching her, wondering what answer there was to make.

"I'll get them," she half whispered. "Not the little ones, not the peddlers. Somehow I'll trace it back, and when I do—"

I stared at her, seeing the blue eyes suddenly cold with a hatred that scared me. Seeing the soft full lips twist and spread in soundless snarling.

"But how, Terry?" I argued. "Al was shouting something in Charlie's Grill about Sheila telling him something. If you know anything like that you'd better tell the police."

Her laugh was harsh and without mirth. "Sheila told who furnished her—another school kid. I haven't anything to go on. Not yet, Bert. But I will have." She lifted her

arm, twisting so that her breasts lifted and pressed tight against the fabric of her dress, almost wantonly. "Maybe I'm not as young as Sheila, maybe not as pretty. But I'll follow her footsteps where I can. Sooner or later somebody will figure me as willing. And from there—"

I gripped her wrists, sick with torment as I stared at her. She was serious, deadly serious. I tried to force a mocking laugh to make light of her intentions. But no laugh would come. This was my Terry, my love, and she was planning to offer herself to the reefer ring.

CHARLIE'S GRILL showed vague blobs of light against the rain-fog that swathed the streets. I pulled in at the curb and shut off the motor, crossing the wet walk and shoving on inside. Somewhere I had picked up a load of tension and from the way Charlie looked at me, I knew my face showed it.

"Chuck Wingate come back yet, Charlie?" I queried bluntly.

Charlie shook his head, eyeing me in that polite withdrawn way of his.

"How is Mr. Winneger, Bert? He seemed sort of—"

"He'll make it," I said roughly, then added, "Tell Chuck I want to see him."

Chuck Wingate would know, if anybody did. I was certain of that much. Chuck Wingate had put in too many years slipping through the murky fringe of the underworld not to be aware of what was going on. He would know about the dope ring. But would he tell it?

I'd been feeding him drinks for a long time now, and he'd gotten to the point where he sometimes visited my flat for a few hours of beer-oiled reminiscence—crime in the old days and long eradicated characters he had known. For that he was a veritable goldmine. For this. . .

"I'll sure tell him," Charlie promised. "If—if there is anything I can do—"

I tried to grin but my mouth felt like the corners were splitting. I nodded, said thanks, and headed back toward the door.

Charlie was a good egg, a fine friend, but you don't go around telling people the woman you dreamed of marrying was using her-

self to bait a damned trap. More than bait. She'd have to follow it through—and repeatedly—if she were to learn anything above the street contacts. Just thinking of it throttled my breathing until I was ready to kill the first man who stepped in front of me.

For more than an hour I cruised the rainy streets in my old coupe, alternately swearing and praying. But there was no solution that I could see. Since the Grand Jury had uncovered the festerous sore, pressure had galvanized the local police into frenzied effort. They had learned nothing.

Finally, heart-sick and exhausted, I turned toward my first floor flat on Pingery for a try at sleep.

I must have made it, for the next thing I knew a neighbor's dog was raising a racket. The fuzzy taste of too little sleep was in my mouth. My legs ached. Mumbling angrily, I decided that I was thirsty and left for the bathroom. But it wasn't water that I wanted. I started back toward bed—and stopped.

A vague blob of silhouette was edging up at the window. Gradually I recognized a hat shape and the hunched lift of one shoulder.

Lethargy dropped away, then, and I threw the water carafe with all the savagery I could muster. Glass shattered explosively. The figure grunted and was gone.

I leaned out the window, but the rain still fogged the night so that I couldn't make out anything. I lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the bed. Was Terry asleep. I wondered, or was the thing she was undertaking gnawing at her nerves? Maybe by morning she'd get over it. But the hope was fragile and without the strength of conviction. I knew Terry, and how much she loved Sheila.

The phone jangled just when I was snuggled down for a final try at obliteration. Wearily I reached for it, grunting, "Bert Mayo."

"Bert! Bert, Al's shot. . . He's dead!" It was Terry, almost hysterical with crying—and with something else.

I couldn't get it. "You're sure?"

"Somebody shoved a gun against the sleeping porch screen and shot him three times through the screen. He was still in bed where you put him. He—" The line went dead.

I SAT numbed, receiver dangling from my fingers. Al dead! Shot! But Al had no more enemies than a friendly poodle. He—A thought crept insidiously into the scope of my consciousness, and I grew chilled.

Al had ranted there in Charlie's Grill. Had said that Sheila had told him something—he had threatened to get them!

Closing my eyes, I tried desperately to rake up some fresh recollection of who had been in Charlie's. I couldn't remember. A blur of nondescript street hangers-on who used the all-night spot as a hangout.

But somebody had been there. Somebody had heard Al. And that somebody had sent word percolating back up the line. Crossing to the bureau, I dug out a Police Special. 38 I'd picked up in ETO. I called it my P-38. But somehow not even feel of the heavy gun gave me much encouragement—I was scared, more scared than I dared to admit.

Coffee wasn't needed to clear my head for the drive toward Al's place. It was a clean little white bungalow with a small picket fence along the drive and a lush growth of flowers perfuming the night air.

Sergeant Bill Jakkob was in charge when I got there. Jakkob was a square cop for any man's force, and it didn't take long for me to unload everything I knew. He shook his head, frowning.

"Most of them are small-time peddlers," he said quietly. "Unless hopped up, I doubt they'd try shutting him up with a rod." He leaned forward, sucking a cigarette as though it had to be sleep, drink, and food for God only knew how long.

"Why," he asked, "when this world has so much clean sunlight in it, do you have to shove your head into this muck? The police are paid to rake trash, but you?"

I glanced at Terry, not answering. Jakkob caught the glance and scowled. But Terry hadn't anything more to say. Nor did I.

The boys in white took Al away, and any hope I may have had of forestalling Terry's crazy scheme were shot in the head. Her determination was doubled, if anything. She made no bones about wanting to be rid of me, so I left.

"I've a good mind to tell Jakkob," I threatened from the door.

She stared at me, without smiling, without softening. "Do you think he'd believe you? And if he did, do you think he could stop me? Al's dead. And Sheila—" She closed the door in my face.

The sun was almost due, marking the day with a misty grayish half-light. But it had stopped raining. I was brittle, tense, like just before jump-off on D-day. But nobody shot at me, nobody lurked in the shrubbery with a shiv. Just me, in the gloomy murk of dawn, beat-up, dead-on-his-feet me. And a load of worry that would bow a steel girder.

Driving past Charlie's, I wheeled in on impulse and called for coffee. The place was nearly deserted. Charlie wasn't there, and the place was being run by two white-jacketed lugs who whistled cheerily while they rubbed crockery and polished glass. Even the coffee was bad. I left two thirds of it in the cup.

The sun had edged up, a smear of orange behind gray dull clouds, when I again hit the street. I needed a bath and shave. I needed—Thinking of Terry, I turned back inside and used the phone. There was no answer. I wondered dismally if she was already circulating along South Avenue. The thought made my stomach turn over.

"Seen Chuck Wingate?" I snarled peevishly.

One of the white jackets just stared. The other shook his head.

A STEAMING SHOWER drove some of the hopelessness from me, but only to fill the vacancy with anger. That damned Chuck Wingate—the only lead I knew, and he ducked out on me when I most needed him. I'm no Hawkshaw. I don't know how to pick a name and address from a stained coffee cup or a blob of mud left under a window. I'm not hardnosed enough to browbeat my way into anything better than a cheap and hasty coffin. I've got to find Chuck and let him tell me where the dope trail leads. I've got to find Chuck, only Chuck doesn't show.

Until noon I waited, and paced, littering the room with cigarettes. Finally I hit the streets again, poking my crate along the maze of alleys and crowded avenues of Little Italy.

Once I was almost certain I saw Terry, but a gaudier, more tinsled type than I had known. She saw my car and turned quickly into a doorway.

The doorway was vacant when I got there. There was just a lingering whiff of perfume that stuck in my nostrils like ether. . . .

Along about four o'clock it started raining again. The evening paper had one small blurb about Al Winneger being found dead; no mention of the dope setup, no hint of any possible connection.

With darkness I headed for Charlie's, figuring to eat and maybe sob on his shoulder. The place was crowded. I stood just inside the door watching the mob, and finally I saw Chuck Wingate peering out from the back booth. I took one step toward him and he was out of that booth like a scared rabbit, ducking into the toilet. I kept going as far as the booth. There I stopped. Already a dozen curious eyes were watching.

Digging for a cigarette, I started to turn away. The light was right, picking a shine from a puddle where beer glasses had sweat upon the table top. I could see where someone had traced, doodling. And then a word leaped up at me. SCRAM!

No idle doodling, that, I sensed quickly; and as quickly swabbed my palm across the wetness.

"Can I help you, Bert?" Charlie stood at my shoulder.

"Coffee, Charlie," I said. "And two fruit rolls. I'll be at the head end of the counter. Put them there."

He hesitated for a moment, and I could see that he wanted to say something. But he didn't. I watched while he crossed to the counter and got my order, shoving a steaming mug of coffee to the far end of the counter, nearest the door. Then he came back.

Chuck Wingate had been afraid to be seen with me, I remembered, ignoring Charlie. His warning on the table top had made that clear. A shot through a screen had killed Al. Another man had been at my window; the man I'd thrown the carafe at. Suppose I'd been asleep, too?

"Know where Chuck Wingate hangs out?" I asked Charlie.

He looked sorrowful and shrugged.

"Where do any of them hang out, Bert? Wherever there's light, and heat, and maybe a bite to eat. Or a sip of something hot."

Chuck was still in the toilet, and I waited. I could cross over and go in, but that would make it too obvious. Yet to keep waiting—and with Terry out on the street. I headed toward the small enameled door. If I had to choose between Chuck and Terry—

But the room was empty. One window slanted out on its metal rods. The screen was ripped. Chuck was gone.

I felt no surprise. I was plain poison to him now. I had been with Al Winneger when Al spouted off. Al had been silenced, but they had no way of knowing how much Al had confided to me—which made me as dangerous to them as Al had been. I realized it without being scared. Only angry. I wanted a chance at those rats. Wanted a chance before Terry got sucked in and destroyed.

RETURNING to the dining room, I heard Charlie yell. A ragged street bum had slipped in through the door and grabbed my lunch. Before anyone could move, he had poured my scalding coffee down his throat and whirled back toward the outside.

"Never mind," I told a furious Charlie. "I've had my share today. Besides, too much coffee might keep me awake."

Charlie fumed and swore in his soft, polite way, and I felt like I'd been whistling at a funeral, making wise cracks when I knew the finger was on me, but good. Charlie tried to give me another coffee. Shaking my head, I headed outside, emerging into a night that was black and wet and strangely cold.

On chance I swung my old crate over to 17th Street. A man was ambling along close to the gutter and I cruised abreast him before I suddenly realized that it was Chuck Wingate.

He whirled, trying to run when I slammed on the brakes. But I managed to grab his arm. He fought, cuffing his gnarled old hands at my face until I elbowed him in the belly. The fight gusted out of him and he whimpered.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, damn it!" I panted. "I just want to talk!"

"I don't know nothin'."

Shoving him into the car, I started driving. But he wouldn't talk. For thirty long minutes I tried pleading, bribing, coaxing; and it availed nothing. He was too scared to open his head.

"Maybe if I put a little article in the *Journal*," I snarled. "Saying that on good authority from Mr. Charles Jefferson Wingate—"

His twisted fingers locked suddenly on my sleeve, tightening with torment.

"They'd kill me, Bert!"

"Well?" I hated to blackmail the poor devil, but memory of Sheila, of Al, dead, of Terry maybe worse than dead, froze all mercy from me.

"I—Manga peddles some," he mumbled hesitantly.

"Rico Manga?"

Dumbly he nodded.

I'd seen Rico Manga a time or two, just enough to know who he was. A small-time sport who spent his time polishing the pointed toes of his glassy shoes, or rubbing his hair until it smelled sweet enough to attract all the honey bees in Orange county.

"He picks up the stuff here and there—comes in the mail to different places," Chuck Wingate muttered. "Rico Manga picks it up himself."

That floored me. "Mail! You mean the stuff is sent through the mail?"

For half a second a wry grisly humor twisted the old man's mouth. "Where's better delivery service than Uncle Sam's mail? Rico puts in his order and pretty soon a little package with stamps on it is left for him."

"How's he pay off?"

Chuck Wingate shook his head. I couldn't pry anything more out of him. The payoff Chuck didn't know about, nor where, nor how a street-level peddler like Rico Manga ordered his poison. It was probably by mail like the delivery, I figured. Foolproof and clean as long as no postal inspector got wind of it.

"Where is Manga now?" I put to Chuck.

Again Chuck shrugged. "Layin' low. He's had his finger in some deals lately. And with the cops workin' overtime—"

We drive around a while and I think it over. Chuck, on his side of the seat, has

slouched down so that only the top of his head shows; he's taking no chances on anybody spotting him with me. He's miserable with fright.

"Okay, Chuck," I finally said. "I'll dump you out, and keep quiet about what you've told me. But if you can locate Rico Manga—"

"You'e shovin' your head into a bucket o' quick lime, mister," he pleaded. "Lay off. This ain't your deal."

WE HEAD BACK toward South Avenue. The rain is still lacing down. A lighted storefront shows a hunched derelict shambling along, and I notice suddenly that he is the old tramp who swiped my coffee in Charlie's. More to break Chuck's grieved silence than anything, I pointed out the bum and ask about him.

A stranger, Chuck mumbled.

While I watched, the man staggered, caught himself and lurched toward a rain-slicked plate glass window where he clung for support. Funny, the thought ran through my head, they have to steal coffee, yet they always manage to get a bellyful of hooch. He went down slowly, sagging with a futile pawing at the thick glass, finally to slump in a heap at the base of the window.

The proprietor hurried from the store, waving his arms and shouting at the drunken bum. A last look I flung back at the farce, and something of the man's rigid stance, jerked me cold and awake. I stopped the car and got out.

"Drunk?" I queried, approaching the storekeeper.

"Dead! And look at his face—he suffered hell!"

I turned back toward the car and was nearly to it before I caught full implication of what had happened. Dead, his face twisted in agony. As if from poison, maybe—like a poisoned cup of coffee. Charlie's—only I knew Charlie wouldn't dope a man. But the cup had been on the counter untended. Any number of people passing along could have dropped in a capsule or pill or few drops of whatever.

"They pois—" I stopped. The car was empty. Chuck Wingate had fled. . . .

Sudden panic filled my throat. I stomped the accelerator hard, racing up the street, weaving around corners. And the fear is alive with me in the car, a thing I cannot outrun. First the gunman at my window! Now a coffee cup tinted with poison! At home, at Charlie's, they know my haunts and are waiting.

Then gradually a saner desperation took hold. I couldn't keep running indefinitely. Sooner or later I had to stop. Sooner or later they would snag me. Time was on their side. I couldn't strike back, because I didn't know—

I remembered Rico Manga. And I ground my cigarette against the windshield glass. Manga I could hit.

I remembered having seen him around Fifteenth Street somewhere, and I drove that way. Fists knotted and shoved deep into the pockets of my coat, I tried half a dozen flea-ridden flophouses in a row. Two admitted knowing Manga. One said that he sometimes got mail there. But none knew where he stayed.

By now the grapevine has been forewarned that Manga is wanted. I could tell that by the shuttling side glances, the pinched, sullen evasions. Yet I couldn't quit.

Then, in a squalid brick barn that smelled of moldy rags and dust, a haggard woman said that she knew Manga. She thought he stayed over on Madison somewhere.

Before she could say any more, I was on my way. Daylight was again trying to seep into the deeper slots of the narrowed streets. I hadn't had sleep in God only knew how long. But a tension drove me. It wasn't sleep I wanted. Just Rico Manga, a dope peddler. A flesh-and-blood human I could dig my fists into.

I tried every door of a two-block stretch, and found nothing. Two more—the third I cross to after having shoveled food into a stomach that was too tight for normal functioning. A gray-clad messenger was climbing the tier of seven rutted steps and I followed. When he shoved a handful of letters and three small packets across the clerk's desk I was at his elbow. One was addressed to Rico Manga.

Manga would be here, then! I sagged into

a broken spring chair and hid behind a three-day-old newspaper. Manga would be after his mail, and when he came— I sucked hard on a cigarette and tried to force patience into my waiting as shaggy denizens of the hotel descended the creaking elevator and departed. A few stumbled in after nocturnal prowlings, but no Manga.

Twice I noticed the woman at the desk eying me, and twice she talked guardedly into a telephone while her eyes tried to pry something damning from my appearance. I shifted, taking comfort from the heft of the P-38 under my waistband. But even that comfort was small. My only lead was that brown paper package. I couldn't leave. I had to wait.

BUT NOON came, and still no Manga. Devils of fatigue began dragging at my eyelids. I slouched, roused with an abrupt chill of horror—but I was alone. No one stood over me with a knife. But I'd been asleep. Someone could have.

I crossed to a hole-in-the-wall on the opposite side of the street and called for coffee. I sat next to the window, watching the broken shadow of doorway across the street. Somewhere a radio was giving with a syrupy commercial and I fought back the sleep that dragged at me, not listening. Then a terse, rattle-voiced news announcer began reciting little items of local interest, impatient to get on to the more important foreign situation.

I listened and ignored it, drowsing despite the scalding coffee I was pouring down. And then a fact percolated through and broke down the lethargy that was hedging me in. *One Rico Manga had been killed by a hit-and-run driver!*

For a long moment I couldn't accept it. Manga was dead. My one lead was gone.

A derelict named Wingate found dead of a fractured skull. Possibly from a fall, the radio continued.

As though I had been sloshed with ice water I sat up stiffly, drowsiness gone. Rico Manga's death might possibly have been an accident. Just possibly. And maybe Chuck Wingate's cracked skull. But not both. I had opened the Pearly Gates on Chuck Wingate by picking him up in my car, and on Rico

Manga by looking for him. I was so hot that death brushed wherever and whomever I met.

And the little brown paper package, I mused bitterly, would never be delivered now. It would return to the post office as unclaimed; then to the dead letter office where it would be opened for notification to sender. Only—and the sudden realization jolted me—the postal boys would find heroin! And then—

I jerked to my feet so fast I nearly tore one leg off on the counter edge. That package—the dope ring would have thought of that, too!

But the package was gone. Manga had sent for it, the woman clerk told me icily. It was addressed to him so she gave it to the man Rico Manga had sent for it.

"But Manga is dead! How could he send—"

The woman shrugged. "It was Manga's crazy writing. I know the stuff, and—here! See for yourself!"

The note she thrust at me was a strange mingling of printed and written letters, laboriously copied. But Rico Manga's, without doubt. Give mail to this man, was all it said. So she had. The man had taken the package and gone out the back way to where he had parked his car.

The starch went out of me. I was whipped; the thing was done. My last hope had vanished when the package got away. All that was left was a certainty that they would come for me, and that I would not be able to make a fight of it. I knew that. Nobody makes a fight of it when he is shot through the head from behind, or when a shiv slices through his lungs from some darkened doorway or alley.

I wandered to the street and fumbled a cigarette into my mouth, standing peering along the littered stretch of sidewalk that stretched away under smoke-blackened walls. Overhead lay a narrow wafer of gray sky. But it didn't interest me.

I backed my old coupe into the clear and wheeled it away from the curb, driving back across town toward Charlie's. It had started there. I might as well round it out by letting it end there.

THE PLACE was almost deserted and I slumped at the counter, nodding wearily at Charlie as he came hurrying up.

"Coffee, Charlie," I said. "Black."

He brought a cup and stood near by as I stirred the stuff, waiting for it to cool a little.

"You—you look tired, Bert." Charlie ventured slowly. "I suppose Mr. Winneger's death and all—"

"And Chuck Wingate's! And Rico Manga's!" I snarled. "And next it'll be Bert Mayo's!"

Charlie stirred uncomfortably. Violence he didn't like, even though his grill was favored by an unsavory patronage.

"But she'll bust wide open, Charlie," I promised, talking as much to myself as to him. And talking loud so that all the others could hear. "I'm going to tip off the postal inspectors. They'll be watching for those plain-wrapped little packages of dope. The street peddlers will order, but won't get delivery. They'll start squawking. Hopheads will start getting desperate, and this thing'll bust its seams."

Charlie nodded vacantly, but I could see he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Maybe—maybe you'll feel better after you've had some rest, Bert," he said.

I didn't answer. A thick-shouldered, husky young punk slid onto the stool next to mine, and I got a tight expectant feeling. I watched him covertly as he ordered coffee. He reached across for the sugar—or maybe to drop something into my coffee!

I grabbed his arm. "No you don't, punk!"

His left hand was fast, far faster than I had anticipated. A fist came up from nowhere and exploded in my face. I went backward off the stool. I rolled, trying to get my legs under me and at the same time get the P-38 from under my coat.

The young punk stood over me, fists clenched. Then, when he saw my hand under my coat, he whirled and ran for the door.

"Don't, Bert!" Charlie had appeared from nowhere. He got in front of me, his brown eyes pleading.

"I—I'm sorry, Charlie," I mumbled. Blood was gushing from my nose, and my mouth was getting stiff and swollen. "He was trying to dope my coffee. like—"

Charlie shook his head. "He just reached for the sugar, Bert."

When I didn't answer, he continued, "Come back to my office and clean up. Then you'd better go home and get some sleep, Bert. You're about played out."

I couldn't argue. He was right. I was too far gone even to run out to the street and try and catch that young punk.

Charlie's office was in the back, a small, lavishly furnished little den where he did a lot of reading from looks of the books scattered around the place. I dropped into a deep chair and buried my face in a wet towel Charlie handed me. A bell tinkled faintly.

"I have to go out front, Bert," Charlie said apologetically. "When your nose stops bleeding—"

The bleeding did stop finally and I slouched back, looking about the dimly lighted little room. Opposite me was a desk and I saw the cigarette box. I crossed toward it, feeling hunger for a smoke.

Charlie hadn't opened his mail yet this morning, I noted. It was stacked neatly on one corner of the desk. And then I stared. An envelope addressed in a curious counter-mingling of printed and written letters—Rico Manga's! Absently I picked it up, staring, trying to get my mind lined out. Rico Manga writing to Charlie? But Manga was dead.

SUDDENLY I lifted my glance and Charlie was there, standing silently in the doorway. Watching. But he was a changed Charlie. Something in the man's eyes told me that I had stumbled upon a fact that should have remained hidden.

"Too bad, Bert," Charlie said softly. "You shouldn't have snooped." He closed the door behind him quietly. There was an incongruously apologetic note to his voice, incongruous because I knew that Charlie never intended me to leave this room alive.

"A man works hard, Bert," he said slowly. "A man works trying to build something for his family. With taxes and everything, he grows old without having much to leave. Then he hits upon something which lets him put a little money aside—and his friends

start tearing it apart for him."

I couldn't answer. Charlie did have a family, I remembered having heard somewhere. But to figure him as part of the dope ring—

The little bell tinkled, summoning Charlie to the front. He started to turn reflexively, then straightened. Something in his eyes made me afraid. The gun—my P-38—I remembered suddenly that Charlie had taken it, to keep me out of trouble, he'd said. He'd lain it behind the counter. Or had he?

I crouched, wondering if I could throw an ink well fast enough and hard enough—"Charlie!" I recognized Bill Jakkob's voice calling through the door.

Charlie recognized the sergeant's voice too, and for a long moment he stared at me. The mournfulness came back into his face, deeper, more poignant now that he realized that the law was just outside the door. Slowly, still watching me, he unsnapped the lock and let the door edge open.

"Charlie, a young fellow reported that a man tried to gun him— Oh, hello." Jakkob glanced questioningly from Charlie to me, sensing the tension.

"Officer, Mr. Mayo has a story to tell you," Charlie said quietly. "It is pretty much true, I think."

Bill Jakkob stepped into the room. Charlie smiled faintly. "An old man shouldn't have to flee. It is impossible to be successful; he shouldn't have to try," he commented bitterly.

Jakkob's brow furrowed and he twisted to peer at me wonderingly. I stood staring, even as Charlie closed the door—from the outside.

Then the spell broke.

"Stop him, Jakkob!" I shouted. "He's in the dope ring! He was going—"

The pistol report smashed sound through the building, coming to us in the little office. I knew the sound—a P-38. And somehow I knew that Charlie hadn't been fooling. He wasn't fleeing any more.

I dropped into a chair and waited as Bill Jakkob whirled, running toward the front of the grill to find what I already knew.

I wondered how long it would take the police drag-net to find Terry. ● ● ●

"You found the money . . . where is it?"

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THE man was tall, heavy, broad shouldered. He had a square, scowling face, and sharp, dark eyes. "My name's Rucker," he said to Sam Dysart. "Detective John Rucker, Homicide. Do you have a son named Eddie?"

a voice which must have been his own, a voice saying, "Yes, I have a son named Eddie. He isn't—"

Sam nodded. "He had a date with a young lady."

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least, he didn't keep it for long. At thirty last night, a man held up a liquor store on West Twenty-fifth. He got away with more than three hundred dollars after shooting the owner of the store. We believe the man who pulled the job was your son, Eddie."

Sam Dysart's legs would no longer hold him up. He sank back into his chair, shaking his head, refusing to believe what he had just heard. His body was cold with a sudden perspiration. He couldn't think, couldn't whip his thoughts into any rational pattern. It was impossible. Some terrible mistake had been made.

"I don't like doing this," Rucker was saying. "I've got a son myself. I know how it would hit me if he got into trouble. But I've got to think of the guy who was killed last night. He had a wife and three kids, Dysart. He was shot to death for a handful of money and when I look at it that way, I burr up inside."

"Eddie didn't do it," said Sam Dysart. "Not Eddie. Not Eddie."

"We found the gun which was used, in the glove compartment of your car," said Rucker. "At least, we're pretty sure it's the gun. When we get the lab report, we'll be positive. A witness saw the car drive away from the liquor store just after the hold-up, and took down the number. Your wife told us that Eddie used the car last night."

"My wife knows—what you think?"

Rucker glanced at his watch. "She's probably at headquarters right now."

Sam straightened a little. When a thing like this happens, he told himself, you face it. And you fight it with everything you've got. You don't listen to the evidence against your son because you know it's false.

And then, aloud, he said, "I'd like to go down to headquarters, too. I want to see Eddie."

The detective nodded.

EDDIE was sitting in a chair in one of the rooms at police headquarters. He looked pale, frightened. He was twisting his hands together when Sam entered the room, and the welcoming smile which came

to his face disappeared almost immediately.

"Hello, Eddie," said Sam Dysart.

"Hello, Dad," said Eddie, and his voice was strained. "I'm—I'm sorry about this."

Eddie's mother wasn't here. In another room, before they had brought him in here, Sam had talked to Martha and had held her in his arms and had felt the trembling of her body. He had said what he could to reassure her, knowing how ineffective his words had been. Martha's face had been tear-streaked and she had looked old. It had never before occurred to Sam that Martha was getting old.

Dan Brock had been in the other room, too. Dan, who was Eddie's closest friend, had been in the service with him, and had been pacing the floor like a caged beast, claiming Eddie's arrest was a frame-up.

"What about it, Eddie?" asked Sam.

Eddie shook his head. "I didn't hold up any liquor store, Dad. I didn't shoot anyone."

"You had a date with Lorraine."

Eddie nodded. He was twisting his hands together again. He was thin and tall, but he had big hands, powerful hands.

"Tell me about it," said Sam. "Tell me what you did last night."

"I went to see Lorraine," said Eddie, slowly. "I didn't exactly have a date with her. I had a maybe date. Lorraine and I—well, things haven't been going well with us lately. She didn't want to go out when I got there. She said she had a headache, but she didn't. She just didn't want to go out. After I left her I drove around for a while, thinking. Then I parked the car and went to the show at the Circle theater. When it was over I drove home."

"Where did you park the car?"

"On Lime street, near Fortieth."

"It was there when you came out of the show?"

"Yes, just where I parked it."

"You hadn't left the keys in it?"

Eddie shook his head. "No, but if you know how, you can start a car without the keys."

"Did you see anyone you knew in the show?"

Again Eddie shook his head. "I don't

even know who I sat next to. I paid no attention. I was pretty much upset, Dad. About Lorraine."

Rucker and another detective in the room were listening to all this—scowling as they listened. They didn't believe a word Eddie was saying. In their minds they had already convicted him. Sam could be positive of that.

"Could you do something for me, Dad?" asked Eddie.

"What, son?"

"I'd like to see Joe Fullerton, if these men don't object."

"Who's Joe Fullerton?" asked Rucker, stepping forward.

"A man who works in the same shop as I do," said Eddie.

"Why do you want to see him?"

A sudden anger lifted into Eddie's face. "If I don't get to see him, I don't," he said almost sharply. "I just—well, I owe him something."

Rucker got Joe Fullerton's address. "We'll see about it," he said vaguely. "We'll see. I'll have to talk to the chief."

Sam and Martha rode home from headquarters in Dan Brock's car and Dan came in for a time, quite a normal thing for him to do. Dan had always been quite at home here. From their high school days, Dan and Eddie had been almost inseparable.

"Eddie didn't do it," Dan declared, pacing back and forth across the living room. "Anyone who knew Eddie would know that. Someone else took the car while Eddie was in the show, pulled the hold-up, and drove the car back to its parking place. But the cops won't try to find the real criminal. They've got Eddie to take the rap. They won't look any farther."

"What about this Joe Fullerton?" asked Sam.

"He's just a guy Eddie works with."

"But why does Eddie want to see him?"

Dan Brock scowled. "I don't know, but that might be something worth looking into."

Martha hadn't said a word since they had returned home. She had hardly spoken on the way. She was standing, now, at the window, her hands tightly clenched, her

body rigid. Sam kept glancing at her. She was taking this hard, he knew, but there was nothing else to expect. Eddie meant everything in the world to her. She had never stopped worrying about him, never would. And a thing like this—

She turned suddenly from the window, her eyes wide, startled, as though just realizing what Eddie faced. "Sam!" she cried. "Sam, what are we going to do?" And there was an hysterical note in her voice.

Sam hurried toward her and caught her in his arms. "Everything will work out, Martha," he promised. "Everything." And over her head he nodded toward the door. Dan Brock took the cue, and left.

THE doctor Sam called to the house gave Martha a sedative, and afterwards, talked to Sam for a moment in the front room. "She's asleep," he reported. "And she ought to sleep until morning. I'll drop by tomorrow. But what about you, Sam?"

"I'll manage," Sam answered.

"And about Eddie," continued the doctor. "Those of us who know him will stick with you."

"Thanks, Doc," said Sam Dysart.

He followed the doctor to the door, then turned back and telephoned a neighbor to come and sit in the house, just in case the sedative didn't work, and Martha should wake up and be frightened if she found herself alone. Fifteen minutes later he was riding a bus downtown.

Joe Fullerton answered his knock on the door. Fullerton was tall, heavy, a few years older than Eddie. He didn't seem surprised at a visit from Eddie's father.

"You're the third to come here," he mentioned. "The first was a detective named Rucker. The second was Dan Brock. I can't tell you any more than I told them. I can say I don't think Eddie's guilty, if that's any help."

"Why do you think he wants to see you?" asked Sam.

"It might be something about work. We had several new processes we were trying to develop. I can't think of anything else it might be."

"What about Eddie and Lorraine?"

"He's crazy about her, if that's what you mean?"

"Have they been having trouble?"

Joe frowned, then shook his head. But the frown which had come to his eyes stayed there.

They talked for a while longer, but it was useless talk, Sam knew. It wasn't accomplishing anything, and finally he excused himself and left, feeling more than ever the hopelessness of accomplishing anything. Someone had borrowed Eddie's car while Eddie was in the picture show. It might have been anyone. It might have been someone he had never heard of and never would hear of. Conversation with Eddie's friends wouldn't pull a name out of a hat.

"Mr. Dysart!" called a voice from a car parked at the curb. "Mr. Dysart, I'd like to talk to you."

Sam Dysart approached the car. In spite of the darkness he recognized the man sitting behind the wheel. A sudden antagonism gripped him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked gruffly.

"Sitting in my car," said John Rucker. "I was just wondering who might drop around to see Joe Fullerton, or if Joe might decide to go somewhere. Hop in. You can wait with me."

Sam didn't want to, but after a momentary hesitation, he walked around the car and climbed in beside the detective.

"A good deal of our work is like this," said Rucker. "Watching and waiting. But more of it is pounding the pavement, hunting up people and asking questions."

"I thought you had all the answers," said Sam, bitterly.

"No, not all the answers," said the detective. "We haven't yet found the money which was taken in the hold-up. It wasn't in Eddie's room when we searched it this afternoon."

"Isn't money just money?" asked Sam. "What if you had found some I had hidden in Eddie's room?"

"We would have given it back to you. Sometimes, money can be identified. You would be amazed at some of the things we can do."

Sam stared straight ahead blankly. He tried to tell himself that if the police were still working on the case, there was hope for Eddie, but he knew, instead, that the police were really working to tighten their case against Eddie.

"It looks like we'll get nothing here," said Rucker, finally. "Can I drop you home?"

"No," said Sam, bluntly. "I'm not ready to go home yet. I want to stop by and see Lorraine."

"Eddie's girl? Why?"

"I want to see her. That's all."

Rucker shrugged his shoulders. "You want to do something for Eddie, and I don't blame you. I suppose if I was in your shoes, I'd be trying the same thing. All right, I'll drive you to where she lives."

THE detective didn't offer to go in with him and Sam was glad of that. He rang Lorraine's bell, and after the door clicked open, took the elevator to the floor on which her apartment was located. She seemed no more surprised to see him than Joe Fullerton had been. Her eyes were red from crying. Her hair wasn't as neat as usual, but she was still lovely. According to Eddie, she was the most beautiful girl in the world, and tonight Sam was inclined to agree.

"Don't say anything," Lorraine begged when he came in. "Don't say anything. I couldn't stand it. It's all my fault. What happened is all my fault."

"Why, Lorraine?" asked Sam, scowling.

"If we hadn't fought—if I hadn't said I had a headache it would never have happened."

"What did you fight about?" asked Sam.

"About—another man."

"Someone you're interested in?"

"No. I'm interested in no one but Eddie. But one night—one night I was—I don't want to talk about it. I just want to do what I can to help Eddie, but they won't even let me see him."

"Who was the other man?" asked Sam.

"Dan Brock. He's Eddie's best friend. He's often gone on dates with us with another girl. I tell you, it didn't amount to a thing. One night Dan had been drinking

and he kissed me and Eddie thought—it was foolish of both of us.”

“You fought over it,” said Sam.

The girl nodded. She turned away, covering her face with her hands. Her shoulders moved as though she were crying. Sam Dysart shifted uneasily on his feet. He wasn’t sure he understood the young people of today. The tone of morality seemed to have shifted since he and Martha were young. Kisses didn’t seem to mean so much as they once had.

Even Eddie, who had had the benefit of Martha’s strict training, before this serious affair with Lorraine had talked almost casually of his relationship with various girls. But there was no point in wandering off on a speculative angle such as this. The sum of the trouble between Eddie and Lorraine seemed to be founded in Eddie’s jealousy, whether warranted or not.

“If we hadn’t fought, we would have gone out somewhere,” Lorraine was saying. “And what happened wouldn’t have happened.” She whirled to face him. “Make them let me see him, Mr. Dysart. Please make them let me see him.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Sam muttered.

The detective was still waiting in his car across the street when Sam got downstairs. Sam headed that way and climbed in beside him.

“Well, how was it?” asked Rucker.

“She was crying,” said Sam. “She wants to see Eddie.”

Rucker grunted.

“Well, why can’t she?” asked Sam.

“I’ll talk to the chief,” said Rucker. “I’ll—” His voice broke off. He leaned forward, staring across the street.

Sam Dysart looked that way, and caught his breath. A man coming along the street had turned into Lorraine’s apartment and was at the door, ringing a bell. A tall man, heavy, broad-shouldered. Joe Fullerton. After a moment’s delay, he was admitted.

“Well, what do you know about that?” growled the detective.

Sam didn’t say anything, but he was suddenly and keenly interested. After about fifteen minutes, the man came out. He walked rapidly off, down the street.

“He didn’t stay long,” said Sam.

The detective shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll take you home, now. No use sitting here any longer.”

SAM typed the note himself. He signed it with Lorraine’s name, hoping the manager of the apartment house wasn’t too familiar with the girl’s signature, or too inquisitive. In the late afternoon he showed the note to the apartment house manager, then waited as he read it.

“So she left some papers here which they need at the office,” said the man, frowning. “A thing like this is a little irregular, but I guess it’s all right.”

“She says there you can call her to verify it,” Sam pointed out.

The man grunted. “I guess that’s not necessary.”

Sam was glad it wasn’t. The telephone number in the note was his office number. His secretary was instructed what to say if anyone asked for Lorraine, but her voice might have been much different from Lorraine’s.

They went upstairs to the girl’s apartment and while the manager watched from the door, Sam crossed to the desk, opened it, gathered up some papers, and nodded. He said, “This is what she wants,” and came back across the room. He followed the apartment house manager to the hall, closing the door himself, but leaving it unlocked.

A half-hour later, Sam returned to the apartment house, entered by the alley door which was unlocked, and took the elevator to Lorraine’s apartment. The manager hadn’t checked the door. It was still unlocked. Sam stepped inside, closed it, and locked it. He started his search immediately.

This was a foolish and reckless thing he was doing, he knew. It was a thing for which he could be arrested, if caught. But he had to do something. He couldn’t just sit in his office and wait. He had tried it. He had tried being patient all morning. He had tried to lose himself in his regular work, but hadn’t been able to.

The money was under the paper at the back of the bottom drawer of the desk. On

his knees at the open desk drawer, Sam counted it. The total was three hundred and eighteen dollars. He didn't know the exact amount taken in the liquor store hold-up, but it had been in excess of three hundred dollars. There was no question in Sam's mind but that this was the money. The money for which a man had been killed.

He turned to the telephone, looked up the number of the police and started dialing. He was so shaky he could hardly perform this simple task. Then, half way through the dialing, he stopped. What would it prove, finding the money here? The simplest answer was that Eddie had brought the money here after the hold-up, that Eddie had hidden it here or had given it to Lorraine to hold for him. Rucker had told him the police needed only to find the money to have a complete case against Eddie. And right now, he, Eddie's father, might be the instrument for closing the trap.

But Eddie wasn't guilty. That was the one thought he had to cling to. That was what he had to believe. Sam Dysart took a deep breath. He dialed the number, completing it this time, and asked for Detective John Rucker. . . .

Rucker sat at the desk, staring at the money. "How do I know you found it here?" he growled. "How do I know you didn't bring it with you?"

"You have to take my word on that," Sam answered.

"I don't take anybody's word on anything," snapped the detective.

He started counting the money. One bill he laid aside, then examined it closely. He nodded his head. "This is it, all right."

"How do you know?" asked Sam.

The detective held up the bill he had looked at so closely. It was a two dollar bill, its corners torn off. "Some people are superstitious about two dollar bills," he said slowly. "They tear off the corners before they spend them, or they mark them up. We found a man the night of the hold-up who told us he had bought a half-pint of whiskey at the hold-up store, only a few minutes before the hold-up. He said he had put his initials on the bill and told us where.

This is the bill. And the total is what we figured from the cash register tape, minus the checks and silver. Three hundred and eighteen dollars. I wonder how it got there."

Sam moistened his lips. "I wonder too."

"Your son could have brought it here."

"No."

"But he could. He could have asked the girl to keep it for him."

"That man who came here last night could have brought the money."

"Fullerton. Sure he could. But why?"

Sam shook his head. He didn't have the answer.

"We'll wait for the girl to come home," said Rucker after a moment. "Women are nervous having money around the house. More than likely, she'll look to see if it's safe. When she finds it missing, she may telephone someone. We'll wait in her bedroom and see what happens."

SO THEY sat in the bedroom with the bedroom door open a crack. Sam Dysart and John Rucker. Sam, whose nerves kept tightening so that he could hardly stand it and Rucker seated placidly in the room's only chair.

"Quit your pacing," said Rucker. "Lie down on the bed and take it easy. Walking around and worrying won't help things."

"What if she comes straight here?" asked Sam. "Straight to this room."

"Then we'll talk to her. That is—" Suddenly the detective's voice sharpened. "She's coming, Dysart. Lie down and keep quiet."

Sam Dysart sat down on the edge of the bed, his hands gripped together, his breath coming fast. He watched Rucker come to his feet, move up to the door and stand there where it was open a crack. He heard the sound of a key in the lock of the hall door, heard the door open, and then heard voices. Lorraine's voice and the voice of a man. He listened intently.

"There's no sense in arguing," said Lorraine. "I won't do it. I've told you that."

"But you need a rest, Lorraine," said the man. "You need to get away from it all. The week-end is here. We could run down to Sea Cliff to swim and bathe in the sun. I tell you, you need it."

"But a trip like that," said Lorraine, "would cost money."

"Who cares?"

"I do," said Lorraine, and she laughed. And it seemed to Sam there was something forced and unnatural in her laughter.

"I tell you, we can manage it," said the man.

Again Sam heard that strange laughter, and then Lorraine's voice. "Not on your kind of money. I'm an expensive gal."

"Wait a minute," said the man. "Let me show you something."

Sam sat rigid on the edge of the bed. He heard the sound of footsteps in the next room and the noise of a drawer being pulled open. He could picture what was happening. The man crossing to the desk, pulling open the lower drawer, reaching into it. He waited, almost breathless.

"So you found it," came the man's voice, and there was a harsh edge to it now. "You found the money, Lorraine. Where is it?"

"What money?" asked Lorraine. "I—I don't understand."

"You found the money I left here in this drawer the other night. It was money I had won in a poker game. I didn't want to risk carrying it with me on the way home. I didn't—"

John Rucker was pulling the bedroom door open. He had taken a gun from his pocket and had lifted it, the business end pointing into the next room.

"I think that about does it," he said sharply. "Except you didn't win the money in a poker game, Brock. That wasn't how you got it."

Brock! It was Dan Brock in the next room with Lorraine. It was Brock who had held up the liquor store, using Eddie's car and Eddie's gun. It was Brock who had killed a man and who had meant to let Eddie take the blame. And he had done that deliberately so he could move in on Eddie's girl.

Rucker had stepped into the next room, now, and through the door Sam could see Dan Brock. There was no color at all in Brock's face. His eyes were wide, startled, and in the look was fear, guilt, and desperation.

"I tell you, I won that money in a poker game," he half-shouted.

"Well, if you did you'll have a chance to prove it," said Rucker. "But it will take some doing, because I've identified the money as the money taken in the hold-up. I suppose you came here afterwards."

Lorraine had backed against the wall. She nodded her head. "He rang the bell. I thought it was Eddie. I let him in. He—he acted drunk. I didn't want him making a fuss in my place late at night. I made some coffee for him and then immediately got him to leave."

"I suppose while you made the coffee, he hid the money," said Rucker. "But why did Joe Fullerton come here to see you last night?"

"Mr. Fullerton came here to warn me against Dan Brock. He said Eddie had told him that Dan had held up a place once before. He said if I wanted to help Eddie, I'd have to trap Dan. That's why I asked Dan if he had any money. I wouldn't have gone with him, anywhere."

Rucker was nodding. "Eddie told me the same thing," he admitted. "I didn't put much faith in it, but we've had men checking up on Dan Brock. We'd have reached him eventually."

Sam felt suddenly very tired. He moved to the wall and leaned against it. He heard Rucker calling headquarters for a car to take Brock in and he could see from Brock's attitude that there was no fight left in the man. Brock was trapped, and he knew it. It was in his face.

"How soon will Eddie get out?" he asked Rucker, after the telephone call had been completed.

"It'll take a little time," said the detective.

"Can you call us, at home?"

The detective nodded.

Sam glanced at Lorraine. He realized he was smiling. He said, "You come with me, Lorraine. Eddie would want it that way. Martha, too. We're going to have good news for Martha."

His spirits were already lifting. He could even smile as he looked at John Rucker. It occurred to him that detectives weren't such a bad lot after all.

TWO-FOR-ONE DAME



Kit was dynamite . . .

and her love lit the fuse

By HARVEY WEINSTEIN

A FEW hours ago I'd been a guy with a hopeless case on the best-looking blonde you ever saw, but in a resigned sort of way I'd been content. Now this girl had declared herself to me, and I was learning that her kisses meant insecurity—and danger.

I couldn't figure why Kit had to stop at McGovern's garage to make a phone call at this late hour when we should have been heading for the first train west. But she had insisted that she had her good reasons—she usually has—and I had parked my cab and followed her into the garage office. I didn't try to interfere. Guess that's why they call me "Easy."

Kit made me stand close to her while she dialed, her slim body pressed against me as if she couldn't bear a moment's parting. It sure was hot in that booth and not because it's hot in June. There's enough girls who can fix themselves up pretty and a few have that natural something that makes a man tingle just looking at them. But Kit—she hit you with pure biology.

"Put your boss on," Kit commanded someone at the other end of the wire.

I couldn't figure why my girl had to phone to Pavone, the biggest racketeer in South Brooklyn, but I wasn't jealous. Kit wasn't his any more. She belonged to me, to me whom Pavone had called a

crumb taxidriver. That's what she had said.

The kind shadows framed the white glow of Kit's face, hiding the hard lines that came from a lifetime of always taking, rarely giving. Not that I'll ever see her different from the golden babe of eight years ago, with the rhythm walk and the gay laugh that was music to me. Me—the knucklehead who was only good enough to carry her books home from high school. The joker who used to front for Kit with her old man, squaring her lies that she'd been out with me when she'd been doing the brights with older men. I even used to square her to myself, as if Kit was entitled to all she could take from life.

SUDDENLY I jerked my big body to attention. Kit was talking to Pavone and her voice had a desperate tone: "Everything's gone screwy. I've got to see you in the coffee pot. Right away!"

She didn't have to say which coffee pot. It's here, opposite the garage, on the corner I've been hacking for years. The place is still called *the coffee pot* because of a famous shooting match, twenty years back when needled beer was going out. My girl's eyes lifted to mine, reminding me to be quiet and trust her, and she grimaced at Pavone's staccato questions in the earphone.

"I said hurry!" No one but Kit dared talk to Pavone that way. "It's life or death that you get here. You may be too late."

She hung up the phone and smiled to me, her eyes bright with anticipation. So easy for her was the change from the urgency with which she'd spoken to Pavone, that I couldn't help but doubt her clever mind.

Uneasily I shifted my gaze through the garage window to the white-top restaurant diagonally across the intersection. Otto was lazily running his rag over the counter as if he had a hunch he could expect customers. Then I felt blonde spun silk nuzzling my neck and I wanted so much to have faith in Kit. She was

scheming for us—for me.

I was sure Pavone would come on the double, even at four in the morning, because that's the power Kit had. If anyone knew how she could bewitch a man, it was I, although I never followed through like Pavone and the others. I didn't have the push in those days, for the same reason I didn't play football, big as I was. Maybe if the coach had dragged me out on the field, I would have made the team. Maybe if Kit long ago had asked me to go steady with her—

Laugh at me if you want, but remember that I was a kid. I had to grow up to learn that girls like Kit don't make love with words. My chance passed, and Kit began to travel with older men. But I was number one now. I should have been on top of the world.

Kit's nimble finger dialed again, and a bitter hand clawed at my stomach because I recognized her own number. A man answered the phone, a man in Kit's apartment. His voice crackled impatiently in the receiver and my girl's gay laugh tinkled in reply. Then she put her finger to my lips and gently pushed me from the booth.

I stood by the window. There wasn't much to look at on this dead corner, just the fluorescent lights of the printing plant beyond the coffee pot and two cats stalking each other in front of the houses across the avenue. But I couldn't eavesdrop on Kit. I needed to have faith in her and I was afraid to overhear what she might be saying to this chap in her apartment.

I craned my neck to check my cab, laying dark far up the avenue; then I lightfooted across the office and peered out at the grimy floor of the garage. From a nearby car came the snores of the night attendant, copping a snooze before day-break. I envied his peace of mind because my own brain was spinning like mad. I was burning because I had a sure hunch that Kit was talking to Miller. Now I knew why she hadn't been able to go home.

Miller had come back to the coffee

pot corner about midnight, for the first time in years. He was a tall dark chap who should have been a gigolo not a gunman. He was backed against a lamp post, talking to a blonde in a crease-cut, green dress and his hands gripped her arms as if he would break her bones. He finally let go so she could open her purse and hand him something. It must have been her key.

I DIDN'T have to look twice to recognize the blonde. The dress was new, but the ankles were a model that would always be in style.

It ripped me to see Kit roughed by Miller—the first time I'd ever seen a man handle her that way, but it wasn't my business to interfere. I'd just deadheaded back from a haul to deep Flatbush and I stayed on my seat to watch them. That was reckless of Kit, talking to Miller of all men, when she was probably waiting to meet Pavone.

Did I think of myself as spying on Kit? No, I just couldn't help looking at her. Long ago I'd learned to face the fact that I'd been hacking this dreary corner all these years just to look at Kit, even though I'd moved to a furnished room in Manhattan near the fleet garage.

In an offhand sort of way, Kit and I had remained friends. She'd pass the time of day with me and sometimes join me for a cup of coffee. I'd usually choke up and have to hunt for words. Her nearness did that to me, but Kit—for all her savvy—never seemed to notice. Only she'd call me by my real name, Lester.

Kit's talking to Miller meant big trouble. There was sure to be hell to pay for Pavone, with Miller out of the pen after four years. Kit had been Miller's girl away back, and he and Pavone had been partners in the rackets. Then Pavone had framed him on a Federal rap. Maybe the black markets had been thinning out, and Pavone had wanted what was left for himself. More likely he had wanted Kit. Right now he might be wanting protection against a hot-rod like Miller, looking for revenge.

From the side street, a stocky man in a tropical suit walked briskly to my cab. He saw Kit with Miller and he braked hard. His brows stood out in a hairy black line and his arm stiffened till I thought he'd break the door handle. I eased my own door open, ready to hit the pavement if the lead began to fly.

Kit had the presence of mind to push Miller off and come to the cab. Like the actress she is, the girl managed an innocent smile for Pavone, but she seemed scared.

Poker-faced now, Pavone handed her into the passenger compartment. "My place," he told me curtly, and climbed in beside Kit.

We rolled for his joint on Gaylor Street, just a long whistle from the corner. I didn't throw the meter because Pavone was good for a buck and liked me to make it all for myself. Through the mirror, I kept glancing at Kit, gold and white—very white—in the back-seat shadows. She had lost her poise, making one think she might have been planning a fast play with Miller. Now she couldn't face it off to Pavone.

In the same crisp voice, just sharp enough to show that he was boiling inwardly, Pavone said to Kit: "I've got to hang around the place and keep my eye on a big crap game. Make sure you beat it home and keep your nose clean."

He had plenty of reason to blow his top, but he didn't, and that's what had me worried. You cross a guy like Pavone, and he sounds off to you or works you once over lightly, you're in the clear because he's got it off his chest. But let him seem to overlook the wrong you do him—brother!

We pulled up a couple of yards past the ginmill that fronts for Pavone's game-room. "Take her straight home, Easy," he said, handing me a deuce.

Beyond his outstretched arm, I caught a glimpse of Kit still choked up with the words that were failing her. I knew she was thinking of Miller, and that Pavone was thinking of Miller, and that someone was sure to get hurt.

NEVER before had I seen Kit so unsure of herself. Strangely, I felt my own backbone stiffening to make up for her weakness.

Pavone drew his hand away after paying me and, flash-quick, he backhanded Kit in the mouth—just to show her who was boss. He probably was about to sound off, and the worst would have blown over for the girl.

I can't honestly account for what came over me. All I could think of was that Kit, adorable Kit, had been hurt. One, two—I leaped from my seat and got the back door open. I yanked Pavone by the collar and dragged him out and chopped down on his head as if I had a club in my hand.

He didn't fall because I held him up, but he shook his head clear and reached inside his jacket to his shoulder holster. With my own rush of temper fading, I was beginning to wonder what to do next. Where did a mere hackie come off to slug a pro like Pavone?

There was a rush of green softness between us and blonde hair brushed my chin. Kit threw herself on Pavone, crying: "Don't—please! He didn't stop to think who you are."

"That big slob!" Pavone growled, letting his hands fall to his side. I didn't kid myself that he wouldn't have backed his bluff if Kit hadn't stopped him.

I guess it did him good to have me for a whipping boy, for his eyes gentled as he looked at Kit. He couldn't stay sore at her because he was plain nuts about that girl. Just as Miller was nuts about her—as I still am.

"Anyone who monkeys with you will find out he's got dynamite on his hands," he warned Kit. He got the girl to promise that she'd keep away from scum like Miller who wasn't going to remain among the living anyway if he stayed in town, and he went into his joint. He didn't look at me again, he rated me so low.

I headed my hack for Kit's apartment, feeling like a mutt that's had its nose chewed for poking it into a buzz saw. Uppermost in my mind was Kit's taking

my part, but that didn't mean she cared a whack for me. I'd seen her stop kids from stoning a stray dog.

The girl sat herself on the Johnny seat directly behind me, close enough for me to feel her warm breath on my neck. "I don't feel like going home," she said.

"Why not?" I asked, without stopping to think that I was poking into her business again. I covered with the hackman's favorite question, "Where do you want to go?"

"Can't we just sit somewhere and talk?" she said in a voice that was strange to my ears. I swung around to peer into her white face, inches from my own, and I swear she dropped her eyes like a bashful kid. My blood pressure went up.

This was a cue I could take. I drove into a residential dead end and backed in among the all-night parkers where my cab wouldn't be conspicuous.

Kit called me back and I joined her on the rear cushion. "Why did you fight for me, Lester?" she asked in the same uncertain voice.

Sitting very close to Kit I couldn't find the right words, not the way my heart was thumping. She should have known the answer—after eight years.

"Why did you fight for me?" she repeated. "For me—a bum!"

"You're not a bum," I blurted out, horrified. "You've got more class than a hundred Hollywood stars with their dime-store divorces."

THIS was the time for me to reach for Kit and cuddle her to me and tell that we could start clean. Just her and me. Nothing counted that had happened before. The impossible was about to come alive and yet I sat frozen, feeling cold sweat glue my hands to the leather seat and dreading that I had to make the first move. And it wasn't dread of what Pavone would do if he could see Kit and me now.

Don't get the idea that I didn't know what cooks with a broad. I've known enough dames, party girls stranded without the price of the taxi ride home,

saloon-hoppers on a slow Monday night, crying-jag wives scouting for their dirty-stay-out husbands. Wives? Often enough they were eager to dry their eyes on hackie's shoulders.

Yet I sat like a log next to Kit, so dry in the mouth that I couldn't even speak. I'd been wanting her so long that I couldn't move. Luckily Kit knew what to do. She crept into my arms and cradled herself like a baby, crying. "You forgive me, Lester? You don't hate me for what I've been?"

"That's past, honey." I kissed the tears from her cheeks, and then her mouth, turned toward me. I understood now that she'd always believed that I despised her, that my casual manner covered my contempt. All these years I could have been her guy.

This I wanted to believe—and I did believe that she was leveling with me.

The hours slipped away and I listened to Kit as she babbled happily about the fresh start we'd make together. Finally I took the wheel and drove where Kit directed, back to the corner where I parked, up the avenue from McGovern's garage. I heard Kit telephone to Pavone and I could see that the girl seemed to be her old confident self. As she grew stronger, I felt myself slipping back into my old uncertainty.

At this moment, I was burning because Kit was talking to Miller who'd been waiting in her apartment, but he must have threatened her so that she'd had to give him a key. And that had happened before she and I had got together.

The door of the telephone booth creaked open, and Kit beckoned me to join her by the window. Together we looked across the deserted avenue, waiting for Pavone to show up. I watched Otto, pretending to keep busy, and I wondered why he burned the neon sign when he could hardly expect another customer till the night shift would come off the big presses around the corner.

A farm truck rumbled by on its way to the market. Kit strained to see around the big vehicle and she shook her head

when I offered a cigarette. I decided she didn't want me to smoke either.

Waiting there, a thousand worries began to plague me. Marrying Kit would be the beginning of trouble. We couldn't hope to live peacefully, even though we were planning to skip Brooklyn this very day. Pavone would never forgive, never forget. And there was Miller who'd had four bitter years in which to dream of Kit. He hadn't come back to give her up without a fight.

An owl cab drew up by the coffee pot. A man jumped out and hurried into the place. It was Pavone.

The cab roared away.

Kit ran to the phone booth. She closed the door and commenced to dial again.

Pavone paced about the restaurant, then sat down at a table near the door. Otto set two cups before him, as if Pavone had said he was expecting company.

THE girl finished her third call and came back to the window. In her excitement she swayed against me, yet she seemed unconscious that I was next to her. From her glowing face, my eyes swung back to Pavone, waiting just as Kit had told him to do, and I thought of a movie I had once seen about a girl named Helen of Troy, and of the things men had done for love of her.

My keen eyes, trained by years of driving at night, saw him first—a tall man, easing alongside the wall near the coffee pot. I didn't have to wait for him to reach the bright area near the door to know that it was Miller.

I nudged Kit and my eyes formed a question, but the girl continued to stare through the window.

Stealthily, Miller opened the restaurant door and stretched his arm through. I got a camera-eye impression of Otto diving behind his counter and Pavone straining erect, and I heard the sharp crack-crack of an automatic.

Pavone crumpled to the floor.

Gun in hand, Miller broke into a run toward the garage. I grabbed Kit's arm, hoping desperately that I'd have time to

hide the girl in one of the storage cars.

She shook herself loose and pointed to the street. A green and white car squealed to a stop. Miller tried to cut the other way, but police cars came from all sides. I thought I saw a futile flash from Miller's gun, but the report was drowned in the roar of police revolvers.

I felt a cold draft on my sweaty forehead and awoke to the fact that Kit had opened the door to the street. "Let's go home, darling," she said.

"Sure, sure," I nodded absent-mindedly. We were safe now, for better or worse—till death did us part. The twisted heap on the opposite sidewalk would never bother Kit and me. Neither would the cooling flesh which, when alive, had warned that it was dynamite to monkey with Kit.

I walked self-consciously, half expecting to be stopped and questioned. People in night clothes poured out of houses to get a close-up of the corpses, and I realized no one gave a hang for Kit and me.

With Kit sitting in the back of my cab, I drove to her apartment house. The girl sat quietly, as if in deep thought, but she blew me a kiss when she saw me eyeing her in the mirror. She didn't look like a woman who had schemed the death of two men who had dominated her life for a number of years. Merely a very pretty girl who had proved that she would do anything for us—for me.

No, I couldn't get over the fact that my girl would do anything for love. We were free to go off and begin that new life together—if I had the nerve to marry her.

An urgency gripped me at Kit's door. I fought off her insistence that I see her upstairs, because it was time to turn in my hack. She said she'd be packed and ready to leave as soon as I'd call for her.

"Hurry back!" my girl pleaded.

I tore myself away, knowing that my resolution would crumble if I spent another moment with Kit. . . .

On the early plane, outward bound for L. A., I was thinking of Kit—I'll always dream of Kit—and of Pavone and Miller.

I was flying alone.

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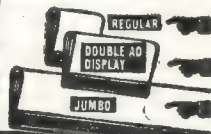
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RUN OF LUCK

—by—

William L. Jackson

HIS LEGS were chilled and wet from the thighs down, and his shirt was plastered against his cold back, but Nick Markos was warm inside. He stood in the rain and darkness, holding the gun in front of him with both hands, and he grinned at the moonless sky. His luck was running high again. He could feel it. The sirens hadn't even started behind him yet.

The highway stretched before him, wet and slick and inviting, but he stayed in the rain-soaked grass and brush on the edge of the swamp. He couldn't chance pushing his luck too far. Not now. Not after the breaks he had had.

Things had sure turned out sweet, he thought. They sure had, even though he would never forget how beat-down and low he had felt that night a year ago when he had first entered the gray walls which he had now put behind him. They had him nearly broken then, and he had thought that his luck had sure run out.

*An escaped convict learns
his lesson—the hard way*



The swamp had concealed him

Old Pop Markos had been nearly broken too; yes, even old Tony Markos, the gray haired Italian with the smile for everybody. All spark of life seemed to be gone from Pop's eyes as he said goodbye. "You musta be brave," he had said in his broken English. "You musta remember you kill a man. You musta plan to pay. But anything you want, you write. Please write many time, Nick."

NICK had wanted to shout that it was just a bum break. "You waited for a break and what did it get you?" he wanted to yell. "I tried to make mine, and I was doing all right. My luck was fine. It changed, that's all. It won't last." But he shoved all of this down inside himself. He didn't have any comeback for Pop this time. Yes, sir, they had nearly had him whipped.

Things had sure changed, he thought. They sure had. Ordinarily a guy with a cop's murder on his hands didn't think of getting out. He didn't think of much of anything but the years ahead of him, each one of the twenty.

But Nick wasn't just any guy. It was different for him. One year, only one year of the repentant attitude and the working and worrying, and he had made the boiler house. Him, in the boiler house. Alone with one guard he had been, with all that iron pipe laying around, and with the key to a locked manhole and the way out dangling on the guard's belt.

The guard hadn't made a sound when he hit him with the piece of pipe. He crumpled quietly, and Nick had his gun and the keys in an instant, with two hours to go before the relief guard would be around to discover the break.

He had come out of the sewer half a mile from the prison, and the swamp had concealed him for another half mile. Now he had reached the highway, and the coffee house the guard had talked about was just over the hill. There was sure to be a car there. There had to be.

He stayed beside the highway until he came in sight of the small roadside res-

[Turn page]

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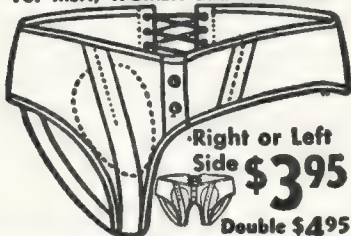
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restaurant, and then he went deeper into the woods, approaching the place slowly and cautiously. There was one car in the parkway. His luck was still strong. He could feel it.

He crept near a window and saw the driver of the car, a stocky man of about forty, ruddy faced and neatly dressed, just finishing his coffee. He slipped quickly to the car and crouched inside on the rear floor, remaining there until his joints throbbed, waiting soundlessly until he heard the coffee house door slam.

The car rocked gently as the driver got in; the motor started; and Nick said, "Drive away from the prison, and drive fast." He put the muzzle of his gun against the driver's neck, and the stocky man nodded silently.

After five minutes, Nick said, "How far have we gone?"

"About four miles," the driver said, and Nick put the gun against his neck again. He looked and saw that there were no headlights in sight on the highway.

"Pull over here," he said, and the driver turned off the driveway.

"Now wait," the stocky man said. "Let me tell you, I'm. . ."

Nick's gun caught him behind the ear, two harsh blows, and he slumped forward, his plea unfinished. Nick quickly dragged him from the car and concealed his limp body in the weeds beside the road. Then he got back into the car, pressing the accelerator to the floor, his eyes on the road, never glancing at the speedometer.

IT WAS a wide curve and it wasn't banked as steeply as Nick had figured. Halfway around he felt the rear wheels slide, and then the skid took hold of the entire car. He fought it as far as the edge of the road and then tried to get out, but he could not. He was inside the car when it stopped its wild rolling against a thick tree.

When he regained consciousness he saw the prison guard's blue uniform above him. He tried to raise himself and could not. His spine was one long rope of pain.

"You tried," the guard said.

"My luck just ran out, copper," Nick answered painfully.

"You're right there," the guard said, and something in his voice forced Nick to try to sit up.

"How bad am I?" he asked anxiously.

"Your spine's smashed," the cop said. "You need a doctor, and you need one right now. But Doc Sands at the prison is still in surgery with the guard you slugged. You'll have to tell us where the night doctor who was supposed to relieve Sands is."

Nick's mouth twisted. "I'll have to tell you?"

The guard's eyes were hard, without a flicker of sympathy. "Yeah. We thought you'd know. You were driving his car."

Answers to Quiz on Page 62

1-f, 2-l, 3-g, 4-n, 5-k, 6-o, 7-e, 8-m, 9-c, 10-d, 11-h, 12-b, 13-j, 14-i, 15-a.

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